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THE LITTLE FUGITIVE HELD HER ARM ABOVE HER HEAD UNTIL HER HAND WAS CLASPED
BY THAT OF OLD HANDCART ON THE BRANCH ABOVE.

OR,

THE RAKESTRAW RUCTIONIST.

A Romance of the League at
Hard Luck.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PINNACLE PETE," "DERRINGER
DECK," "HANDS UP," "THE DUDE DETEC-
TIVE," "HURRAH HARRY," "SOFT
HAND SHARP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAIFS BY THE WAYSIDE

"TRAPS an' trace chains!" muttered Little Lum, holding the branches carefully apart, and peering downward.

"It's ther cry ov a leetle girl—er else I've bin fooled by a painter. I'd ez soon think ov meet-in' one hyer ez ther other, an' either'd be mighty bad medicine about now."

The boy stood upon the edge of the bluff-like bank, about forty feet above the surface of the sullen stream that flowed below. Down at the water's edge there were huge trees, and over

the whole face of the bank were smaller trees, shrubbery and bushes. He was well screened.

For the same reason it was difficult to obtain even a glimpse of what might be on the opposite side, from whence the sound seemed to have come. He knew the ground well enough, however; and listened with every sense on the alert for a repetition of the sounds that had caught his attention but a few minutes before, as he was hurrying to his camp, which lay some miles away, on a branch of the main stream.

For a little while there was such complete silence that any one less certain of himself might have thought he had been mistaken; or might have exposed himself as he pushed downward, for investigation.

But, Little Lum, though young in years, was old in experience, and knew that he would be more than likely to meet danger when he was no longer alone. He was ready for that if it was necessary, but he would a great deal rather avoid it than overcome it. He could fight desperately enough when it was necessary, but would sooner show his heels.

After a little his vigilance was rewarded. He heard the sobbing once more—this time, if anything, fainter than before.

"It's a girl sure enough. Can't fool me on that. But, what in ther name ov wrath are she doin' hyer? May ez well step a little cautious. Either she's run away from somebody, or else somebody put her hyer. That somebody'd be mighty apt ter make fish-worms ov yourn truly ef he come across me a spookin' an' a peerin' 'round. Le'mme see: How kin I reach her best? Ef a feller went slidin' down, reckless like, he would make a heap ov noise tumblin' over ther ledge when he missed his foot, down thar. An' I'll bet that somebody hez long ears. It won't do ter say a word tell I see that ther coast are clear."

The lad knew the stream like a book, and was as well acquainted with that bank as though he had gone down it a dozen times.

He slung his carbine over his shoulder, touched the pistol at his belt, and then slipped cautiously and noiselessly down, his ears alert for any other sound that might blend with the faint sobbing which he still heard.

At the edge of the stream, which he reached without a single slip, he halted again and listened, before trusting himself to look out at the open glade, which he knew lay on the opposite side. Some large trees were scattered about, but he was sure that they would not hide the child he was so anxious to see.

Still no sounds of any one else. He crept from the mat of bushes under which he had been sheltered, and closely hugged the trunk of a huge cottonwood.

Then he could see a childish figure, crouched by the side of one of the trees on the opposite side of the stream. A girl had her head buried in her arms, and was evidently trying to repress the fit of weeping which had overpowered her in spite of herself. A very woe-begone figure did she exhibit, and the boy felt his heart strangely moved at the sight of it. He wanted to cry out, to assure her that there was a friend near, who would care for her, but, it was some distance to the girl; and if his voice was elevated enough to reach her, the sound would carry as far in any other direction; and he was not satisfied that it would not be heard by other ears, though as yet he had seen no sign of the presence of any other human being. He restrained himself, slid cautiously into the water, which was almost waist deep at that place, and silently forded the stream. Warily he raised his head above the level of the bank—and drew it down again without waiting for a second glance. The somebody he had been expecting was on the way, and in view!

"Lucky for me that I kept quiet," thought the boy, as he dodged down. "Sorry for ther leetle girl; but this hyer is a time ter go slow. Want ter see who he is, and what he means ter do, afore I chips in on his game. It may be that it's all straight goods, but I wouldn't like to be bettin' on it. Hez a rough and tough sorter look. Ef he means harm ter ther leetle one he'll find Little Lum are around; but he won't know it, either. Looks ez though he could take three ov me fur breakfast, and then be mod'rately hungry. Let's see what he's doin' now."

Near him a tree overhung the water, and its trunk offered a means of concealment while he took his observation. He drew himself out of the water, a little at a time, so that the dripping of the water would not be audible, as it ran down from his clothing, and finally gained the desired post of observation without the possibility of having been seen by the man, of whom he had lately had a glimpse.

The fellow was still a good ways off, and was acting with a caution second only to that of Lum. Clearly he did not want to be seen by the child, whom he was intently watching.

"Ef looks go fur ary thing he's one ov ther kind ez would cut a throat fur a dime, an' throw in a coffin ef he knowed whar ter steal one. What's his leetle game, now? He don't want ther girl ter see him, but he ain't goin' ter drop back an' leave her alone. Looks ez though he hed su'thin' ter do, an' didn't like ther job. Susan Jane, yer may ez well git ready. I never

drawed a bead on a white man yit, ter shoot, but ef ther time comes ter do it I guess I kin hold plumb center."

The carbine at his back was the Susan Jane he was addressing in his thoughts. He brought it around, and down to a ready, cautiously cocking it as it came, and the muzzle lay in exact line with the heart of the other lurker.

The man who was watching the child with evil eyes began to move cautiously, approaching with the stealth of an Indian. From his garb and face it was plain that he was not a red-man of the forest. He was dressed like a trapper, though he acted like an outlaw, and his face was dark and forbidding. When he had drawn a little nearer the boy recognized him with a start.

"Thort he seemed familer like. It's Kale Canyon, an' ez big a wolf-hound ez ever. He ain't wastin' his time trailin' one leetle girl fur nothin'. Good fur her that I'm here. He's gettin' closer so ez to be sure ov his shot. When he raises his gun I reckon I'll raise mine."

There was not the least particle of excitement in the muttered words of the boy, and yet the fact of his having uttered them when he was otherwise so noiseless showed that the recognition of the man had stirred him up more than the knowledge of the crime that he was contemplating had done. At first, it is true, he had only suspected; but when once he recognized Kale Canyon he knew.

"It's a foul shot, an' a nasty deed thet Le's tryin' ter screw hisself up ter; but ef I leave him go he'll git thar. There's nothin' too mean er too bad fur him. Ef I struck him dead, right thar whar he stands, it wouldn't be a crime, but he's a livin' critter, an' it goes ag'in ther grain ter drop him from behind, er when he ain't a a-lookin'. An' ef I give him a show he would git away with me. He can shoot ez fast ez Little Lum, and he don't have ter pull trigger twice."

Several times the ruffian halted, half raised the carbine he carried, but as often dropped it, after the manner of a man who intended to do some deed, and yet hesitated.

At last the time came when he had made up his mind. He threw up his carbine with the careless ease of a man who is master of the weapon, and his hand sought the trigger. It almost touched it when Little Lum tightened his own finger, and then, without waiting to see the result of his shot, slid down the bank, and hurriedly made his way along the stream until he was perhaps fifty yards closer to Canyon than he was when he fired.

Then he raised his head above the bank, for a hasty glance.

What he saw was satisfactory. He had not aimed to take the life of the man, bad though he knew him to be, but had sent his own shot a few inches above the hammer of the carbine, striking the wood of the stock full and fair.

At the shot the weapon flew out of Kale Canyon's hands, and the man staggered back. He was not injured at all, though the wonder was that the glancing bullet did not wound him.

For an instant he stood in silence, gathering his wits about him, and gazing from this side to that, seeking to find out from what point the bullet had come. His whole attention had been at the moment so exactly centered on the girl, that he had not noted the flash, and he was inclined to think that it had come from the shrubbery on the bank beyond and above him. He did not examine the gun, which he was pretty certain was now useless, but drew a pistol from his belt, and broke for the nearest cover.

As he dropped behind the nearest tree he heard the sharp voice of Little Lum.

"No use; hands up! If you move I'll drill yer. An' I kin do it ez easy ez shootin' yer gun outen yer hands. You an' I hez got ter have some talk afore yer moves off, an' ef ye're wise you'll keep yer cloth all on till we come ter some arrangement. Ef not, you'll drop, an' I'll go on an' look fur some other man. What war yer goin' ter do to ther girl? I seen yer pointin' yer shootin' iron this ways; but yer wouldn't want ter hurt a innercent child like these."

Lum was speaking ironically, and Kale Canyon knew it. His intention had been divined by this boy, whom he could not see as yet, but whom he recognized by the sound of his voice. He had met Little Lum, and the meeting was not one for him to remember with pleasure. The boy had beaten him shooting, both with rifle and revolver; and afterward held the drop on him when he would have maltreated him. Perhaps he might have gained the upper hand by falsehood and strategy, but before he had time to do so witnesses turned up before whom it was not safe for him to carry out his cruel will, and he slunk away. This was some months before; but it was not likely that he would forget the voice that had halted him at the muzzle of the pistol behind it.

All this went through the mind of the man like a flash, and he threw up his hands with a readiness he might not have shown. A man might threaten, and yet neglect to pull the trigger; but he was sure that this boy would do as he said, if it was only for the sake of his own

safety. And he was sure, too, that there would be no missing when the shot was fired. He would temporize, as he had done before; and if the opportunity offered, he would slay. Or, if it seemed best, he would run away until he could get a chance to come back with an even, or a little more than even, position.

"Don't be too brash, youngster. It ain't a good thing, ner a safe thing to kill a man, even out here, where there's no one looking at you. I thought that old affair at the fort was settled and forgot. I didn't mean no harm then, but I didn't want a kid like you to ruffle 'round me too fresh. Better drop your gun and clear out afore my pards come this way."

"No pards ov yourn are comin' this way. When a man goes out ter do a job like that you war at when I chipped, he don't take no pards with him, er let 'em know whar he's goin'. I'm goin' ter put yer in a hole long ernuf ter let me out; an' ef them same pards come along then, it's so much ther better fur you."

"Why, you idiot, what do you think I was going to do? That little imp, there, ran away from our camp, and I have had a lively old chase to find her. I ought to have given her a good scare; and I would if you had not chipped in so fresh. The young fool would starve to death out of pure meanness, rather than go along with her folks. You keep your hands out, now, or there will be worse trouble for you than you have ever had."

"Nice lot ov folks they be, thet she'd scone starve ter death than stay with 'em. She's with me, now, an' she'll stay thar tell I know s'utnin' more about 'em, an' her. Stand thar, with yer hands up, till I git to yer. I'll keep ther drop all ther time, an' ef yer moves, down yer goes fur good an' all."

"Look out for him; and don't believe a word he says," whispered a girlish voice in the ear of the boy. "I know they want to kill me, and that was the reason I ran away. We had better get away from him now, or he my kill you, too."

The girl had recognized the voice of Little Lum as belonging to a friend, and while the attention of the two was otherwise occupied she had crept away from the spot where she had been crouching, and finally reached the side of her young champion, without being seen on the way.

"Good for you, little one!" whispered the boy, in response. "I war just fingerin' how ter get yer hyer without lettin' on ter him. I kin throw him cold, in course; but I don't want ter do it, an' he knows it. You hang on tight ter my heels, an' say nothin' more till I give ther word. I'm goin' ter move, now, an' mebbe it won't be in a hurry. Oh, no! An' Kale Canyon 'll have ter peel his eyes ter see us goin'."

The lad had already slung his carbine. Now, he took the hand of the girl, and, dropping behind the bank, which was here four or five feet high, noiselessly hurried along, his course almost directly toward Kale Canyon, and his feet leaving no imprint on the narrow, gravelly beach.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN IN THE TREE.

LITTLE LUM was sure enough that he could drop the man if he desired, but, that was what he wanted to avoid. He did not wish to kill him, nor to wound him, either. In the latter case he could not go away and leave him to die; and if he remained to take care of him he would be as badly off as at present. What he most desired was to give the fellow the slip, and have some conversation with the child he had by the hand. He could then tell better what his future course must be.

The idea of the lad was to try and pass Canyon while hidden behind the bank of the stream. If the desperado remained quiet for a few moments he was pretty sure this could be done; after that Kale would be more than likely to lose time in searching the ground at a point beyond the spot where he first heard the voice of the boy. And if he had five minutes' grace, Little Lum was confident that he could give him the slip, altogether.

Of course, a great deal depended upon the girl. If she was too frightened, or too weak, to keep up with him—or if she made a noise, be it ever so slight, they would probably be overtaken; then they would have to fight it out.

From the way she was sobbing when he first heard her one might suppose that Lum would not have felt much confidence in the child; but he did. Her coming so silently to his side, and the cool way in which she had whispered to him, convinced Lum that if her strength did not fail her she would do all that he could wish.

Everything turned out as the boy had hoped. Canyon stood for some little time at the foot of the tree behind which he had sought refuge, waiting for the boy to make his appearance. He imagined that Lum was watching him to see if the challenge to hold up his hands was obeyed. He intended to wait until the lad was near him, and altogether off his guard; then he would make a desperate effort to crush him, and believed that he would succeed.

After a little he began to understand the nature of the trick that had been played upon him, and was far from angry. If the youngsters had fled there would be little difficulty in

getting upon their trail, and he would sooner approach the boy from behind than run the other risk that he had contemplated. He glanced along the stream, and it seemed to him that he could guess at the exact course of the fugitives. If they were skulking under the bank he could easily head them off, and could keep himself under cover a good deal of the time. He did not search for the spot where Lum had stood when he fired the shot that ruined his carbine, but pushed straight forward, until he satisfied himself that he had made the largest kind of a mistake. By that time Lum had all the start he wished for, and unless Kanyon struck the trail by some lucky chance it would take an hour to find it.

Once well past the spot where Kale was standing, the boy again crossed the stream, still leading the girl by the hand. Their feet left no mark along the gravelly beach, and in the water no trail would lie. When he ascended the bank on the opposite side Lum was careful not to leave behind him a bent twig, or a bruised leaf that might mark the spot, and once at the top he gave but a single glance around to make sure that no one was in sight, and then moved hastily off.

"Have ter step out lively, now, little girl. Sorry if ye'r tired, but, we got ter go a quarter ov a mile or so, lickety brindle. After that, Kale Kanyon 'll have ter do some lively ridin' ef he wants ter strike us. Mebbe he kin lift ther trail right hyer, but it will take a sharp eye ter see it, an' he's better on ther shoot than on a blind lead. No talkin', now, tell I give ther word."

The girl was not as tired as Lum had feared, and with a renewed prospect of escape she held doggedly on, in a way that was a matter of admiration to her companion, who looked at her from time to time to see if she needed assistance, or would be apt to give out before what he considered the line of present safety was reached.

Her steps did lag a little, at the last, but Lum began to feel assured, and of his own accord slackened his pace. They had reached the head of a ravine which rapidly deepened, and ran almost at right angles to the course of the stream which they had left behind them.

Presently there was a bend in the line of the depression, so that the two were no longer visible from the higher ground behind them.

"Thar's quite a long tramp ahead ov yer, youngster, an' ef you got a place ter strike fur you hed better say it now, afore we go further. But, ef you got no friends nigh, guess you'll hev ter hang on ter me till we kin see s'athin' better. I ain't big, ner I ain't handsome, but I'm ther best kind ov a pard ter tie to yer ever heard ov. W'ot's yer name?"

"Call me Faith, if you must call me anything; but, do not let us talk now. Let us get as far away as we can from that horrid man. He would kill us both if he found us."

"Sense an' wisdom in that; on'y, mebbe, ther killin' wouldn't all be on one side. Thort yer might want ter rest a bit. Ef not, hyer goes."

Again they hurried away; and this time they did not stop until Faith gave a gasp and a tug, and almost breathlessly intimated that she could go no further without a rest.

"Rest she be. Might 'a' felt like it meself ef I hedn't hev knowed it warn't fur off ter whar I war goin' ter halt. Camp ain't fur off; an' guess we'll find pard thar a-waitin'. Won't he open his eyes when he sees me a-comin' with my fambly? Leetle girls don't grow 'round hyer on ther bushes; fact are, they're kinder sk'ass. Fur which, we'll take all ther better keer ov yer. When yer gits wind ag'in let me know an' we'll be movin'. No use ter tell ther same story twice, an' I want pard ter hear it afore we make up our minds w'ot we're goin' ter do. Kale Kanyon ain't hyer alone, an' we got ter know what sorter a lay him an' his friends are on, afore we make out ef we're ter run, er fight."

"Go on," urged Faith, faintly. "I can walk better than I can talk, and I am so hungry and thirsty that I am ready to drop. I had a drink at the river, but it did no good; I was thinking of something else."

"Keep yer sand an' it won't be long afore you kin have stacks ov grub, an' water by ther barrel. Take my hand ag'in, an' let me help yer along. Ef yer can't make it, say ther word an' I kin leave yer here a bit an go fur pard. We kin tote yer in ter camp."

"Oh, no; not alone!" replied Faith, with a shudder. "I can walk. You are very good to me; and, I don't want to cry, but, indeed, I can't help it."

"Cry ef yer feels like it. In course yer kin. It's like a full-grown woman. Cry when yer feels bad; an' cry when yer feels good. It's cheap, easy, an' soothin'. Sometimes cry meself—when I hev time. Mostly am too busy. I ain't goin' ter cry now. Mebbe to morrer'll do. Praps we mou't cry then, tergether. Couldn't yer put it off tell then?"

Lum spoke soothingly, and there was no evidence that he did not mean what he said, but it is possible that his words had the effect he intended. Faith sprang to her feet, dashing the tears from her eyes as she exclaimed:

"Never mind about to-morrow, but you shall see no more of them to-day. I don't believe you

ever cried in your life, and I won't have you making fun of me. Go on. I shall not stop again until you say so, or I drop."

If the boy had not been so greatly her friend she would have been furiously angry with him. As it was she was enraged at herself, and had no hesitation in showing it.

The lad did not stop to argue with her, but accepted the mood. He was not tired himself, and perhaps he scarcely made enough allowance for a girl that was. At all events, he took her by the hand and led her along at as rapid a rate as ever.

Finally the pace was once more slackened, and Lum gave a low, trilling whistle.

The signal was at once answered, at no great distance, by a whistle of the same kind.

"Thar he am!" chuckled the boy. "That's pard. Won't he jest open his eyes when he sees ther back-load I've picked up? Wal, I reckon! An' it won't be healthy fur that Kale Kanyon, ef he comes wanderin' 'round hyer. My pard hez a way about him—sich a way! He'd turn Kale upside down afore he knowed who hed hold on him. Look at him when yer sees him, an' I bet you'll admire."

No answer seemed to be required, and very little had been told her; but there was something about the boy, when he spoke of his pard, that made her curious. She did not know what to expect, and rather thought it would be just what she was not prepared for.

"An' hyer ye be, at last," said a strange voice, coming from somewhere near, though she could not exactly locate the direction of the sound.

"B'in a-lookin' fur ye fur a hour. An', what's that ye got in tow? Looks ez tho' it war a knuckles ov a comin' wooman. 'D ye find her on a tree, er war yer fishin' in ther stream, an got a mairmade? Not a bad ketch ef you kin hold her tell she's growed; but jest now ther's things I'd sooner hev than a gal ov her bigness. Hez a long life ov miz'ry an' onusefulness ahead ov her. An' fur ther present, there's hot water an' discomfort. W'ot's her name?"

"Faith, war what the young princess handed in at ther door. Mebbe ther mou't be some more ter add ter it. I didn't ax many pertick'lers. Save time ter have her tell her story on't when we could both hear it. After that you kin tell w'ot's best ter be did. I'm kinder puzzled, so fur, meself. Meantime, it's posserable thet some ov her frien's are a huntin' her up in hopes they'll ketch me along with her, an' make it woful fur a boy ov my size. P'raps we hed better git under kiver."

"That's a skientifik truth. Nobody wants leetle gals; but there's a awful racket about 'em when they're lost; an' when they're found they ketch jest ez big fits ez ever."

By this time Faith had located the voice, and found the owner of it. He was leisurely swinging on the limb of a tree near by, his heels dangling downward a surprising distance below the knees that were on a level with the limb.

He looked as though he might have been taking a siesta on his perch when disturbed by the whistle of the boy, for he was rubbing his eyes while he spoke, and looked at the girl in a manner that made her think he did not see very clearly, just then. Before he had finished, however, the eyes were twinkling brightly enough, and he did not look the misogynist of his speech. His face was covered with a thick growth of beard, except for those eyes, and the little, turned-up nose that glowed redly below them. He was dressed in much the same way as the boy, and it was easily seen where the latter had got the manner which Faith thought so peculiar. No doubt they were old friends and associates.

While she was considering this, and wondering what she had better say in case the boy vouchsafed a more particular introduction, the latter turned to her once more.

"Don't mind Old Handcart. He likes leetle girls ez much ez I do; an' yer couldn't find a better frien' frum hyer ter Columby. Jest give me yer foot, an' reach up ter him while I give yer a boost. You'll hev ter climb ther tree, an' ther sooner yer gits thar ther better. Ain't sure but what I hear Kale Kanyon a-comin' now. Won't hurt yer ter retire a bit, nohow. Hyer yer goes!"

The mention of Kale Kanyon's name was enough to make the girl perfectly obedient, even if she had just been thinking ever so strongly of learning more about these people before trusting them any further. Placing her foot in Lum's hand, as though she was about to mount a horse, the little fugitive held her arms above her head until her hand was clasped by that of Old Handcart on the branch above. Then, Lum gave a toss, and she found herself on the limb, with Lum scrambling up beside her.

"This way, Faith. Thar won't be far to go, an' I'll hold yer hand tell we git to ther end of ther branch. Come on."

If Faith had belied her name ever so much she would have had no option in the matter, since the hand of the man tightened on her wrist, she was swung forward into his arms, and before she well knew what was going on she was in darkness, and being carried down a ladder, that stood within the hollow trunk of the old tree.

CHAPTER III.

FAITH AMMERSLY'S STORY.

"Thar's more in a wood than tim'er, eh?" laughed the boy, as he saw the astonishment of the girl a little later.

He had lit a lamp, of very primitive construction, which was fed with fat, and had a twisted taper of cotton. It gave a rather feeble light, but Faith could see that she was in a small cave, that was evidently the habitation, or retreat of the two. The furniture was certainly not of an extravagant kind, but it was possible to exist there; and it would certainly be hard for Kale Kanyon to find the spot, or to force an entrance if he did. She sunk down on the rude couch, that was near her, with a sigh of relief, and gave no other answer to the query of the boy.

"Now, Handcart, this little girl sez she's hungry ez all git-out. You don't want ter talk her ter death till yer gits somethin' ready ter stay her in'nards while she's goin' through her cateclysum. Ef Kale kin smell smoke I'll bet a dollar he can't tell whar it comes frum, an' he kin snook 'round tell he gets tired. Fall ter work. Ther' are water in the canteen ef she's dry, an' it won't be long afore you kin git up a spread-out ez will make her feel like a new woman. Taste this, Faith; an' then rest yerself tell we call yer ter grub."

Faith was both hungry and thirsty, but she felt more need of rest than either food or drink. She moistened her lips with the water in the canteen handed her by Lum, and then, dropping back again, closed her eyes. Before Old Handcart, as the boy called him, had time to turn around twice, Faith was sound asleep!

The culinary operations ceased at once, and the man turned to his young companion.

"Now, then, perceed ter explain. W'ot's this leetle thing doin' byer; how did yer come ter hev her in tow; an' how does Kale Kanyon come ter hev ary thing ter do in ther matter? W'en I hev a pard, a real pard, ez I'm a trustin' ov, w'ot he 'does goes without sayin'; but all ther same, w'en I git ther chance ter ask ques'shuns without ther onproprietary of speakin' afore strangers, I'm ez keen ter git at ther fax ez ther next man. You kin perceed ter onload."

There was not much of an explanation to be given, so far as anything the girl had said was concerned; but between what he had seen, what he had done, and what he suspected, the boy managed to make quite a story, to which Old Handcart listened in silence; now and then shaking his head as though not altogether satisfied with what he heard. When Lum had finished he remained silent for some time, holding the lamp so that its light fell on the face of the girl, which he scanned narrowly.

Faith was a pretty child, in spite of her torn dress, unkempt hair, and tear-begrimed face. She looked as though she might be twelve or thirteen years old.

"An' yer sez that Kale war drawin' a bead on her? Humph! Thar's money in this somewhar; but I guess we'll hev ter git her say-so afore we kin smell much funder inter the mizzery. I'll git that grub, an' be thinkin' over it afore she awakes. You kin bet we ain't heard ther biggest part ov ther story yit. An' I ain't sure thet she's compotent ter tell it. Ther's a heap ov trouble on board fur some'un ef we do ther squar' thing."

"An' that's w'ot we do, every time," asserted Lum, looking anxiously into the face of his companion.

"In course, in course; but, w'ct that are we can't tell till we hear more about ther diffikilty. Guess she hez slept 'bout long enuf. I'll git a bite ready, an' arter she hez swallered that she kin hev ther floor, ter elucidate ther position."

Shaking his head, as though he was afraid that he would hear nothing very welcome, however interesting it might be, when Faith undertook to "elucidate the position," Old Handcart turned away, and busied himself with the few preparations necessary for getting up the promised meal.

In one corner of the cave there was a small pile of dry wood, and a fire was soon lighted in a narrow fire-place, which had been scooped out of the rock, where there had been an original crevice, communicating with the open air above.

Carefully the fire was fed while he prepared a cup of coffee and a bit of broiled meat. When he had added a few cakes of pilot bread from their small sack of stores the operations of the cuisine were complete, and Faith was gently aroused.

She awoke with a start, and for a moment was somewhat bewildered, but was easily reassured; and that she enjoyed her rough meal with the zest that belongs to youth and hunger was greatly to the satisfaction of her hosts.

After she had disposed of a satisfactory quantity of food Old Handcart lit his pipe, Lum threw himself on the floor near the girl, and the catechism began.

It did not take much questioning to draw from Faith all of the story she was only too anxious to tell, and before long the two were in possession of the facts, as far as she could give them.

Her father had sent for her to join him. He

was at a mining-camp, somewhere to the south, but she was neither certain of its name, nor of its location. He had led rather a wandering life for some years, while she was at school, and his few letters were not very satisfactory. In his absence she was looked after by a man who had acted as her guardian. Though she had never been attached to him, and had seen him but seldom, she had felt safe in acting under his guidance.

For some months she had heard nothing from her father. Then, her guardian came to her with the intelligence that he was very sick, and that he had sent for her to join him at once. He tried to impress on her mind that it was not a sickness that must end in death, but rather one that required a careful nurse, such as could not be obtained in that far-away camp. Faith was ready and anxious to go and he had accompanied her as far as public conveyances would take them, and had then intrusted her to the keeping of the master of a small train, which was just starting out. And that master, guide, or whatever he may have been, was Kale Canyon.

There were several other men in the outfit, and they all seemed a surly set. If it had not been for the presence of a young woman she would have felt uncomfortable with them from the first. Who this young woman was she did not know, any more than that she was called Magdalena, and had treated her with kindness from the outset of the journey, though always acting, as Faith thought, a little strangely. They slept together in one of the wagons, and the men had little to say to either of them. One of them seemed to be Magdalena's father, though she gathered that only from a certain manner in the two when they were near to each other.

Magdalena slept with a revolver under her head, and after a day or two Faith saw that she watched the men, especially Kale Canyon. She even gave her what she now knew was a hint to be on her guard, and to look to her for protection in case of any emergency. She did not understand at once, but afterward it filled her with a nameless sort of fear, of which she did not care to speak, but which caused her to watch those around her, and it was through this that she came to find out the evil that was meditated.

Magdalena was sleeping by her side when she awoke and peered out from under the cover of the wagon. She saw three men sitting by the dying embers of the camp-fire.

They were talking in whispers, and had the look of conspirators.

Something nerved her to steal out, and creep nearer. It was a new business for the child, but she advanced slowly, and with caution. A little clump of bushes aided her to gain a position where she could overhear what they were saying; and she found that they were talking about her.

They did not speak clearly of what it was that was to be done; but the very vagueness was a revelation. Whatever it was they had in view, it was to be finished the following night. It seemed that the only trouble they foresaw was with Magdalena, and the man who had appeared to be her father was cursed quite roundly for her presence. In the end it was settled that he was to take Magdalena with him, and leave the train the following morning.

No doubt the conference was prolonged, but Faith waited to hear no more. She blessed herself that Magdalena was with the party, but she could put trust in her no longer. She crept cautiously out of the camp and ran away, without the least idea of whither her steps would take her.

Probably her absence had not been discovered before morning, for the sleep of Magdalena was apt to be deep when undisturbed. If pursuit was made she knew nothing of it, and wandered on, and on, until she was too exhausted to go further. She sunk down, and as she had done more than once that day, fell to crying. The rest Little Lum knew as well as she did. Had he not heard her, and come to her rescue, there was little doubt in her mind but that Kale Canyon would have added a cold-blooded murder to his other crimes.

She cast a look of gratitude in the direction of the boy, which he could not fail to see, even in the dimness of the cave, and reached out her hand for him in a confiding sort of way, that showed how great was her confidence, and her gratitude.

Unconscious to herself she told her story in a dramatic way, that made it seem new and thrilling. When she had finished Lum heaved a sigh of relief as he took her hand.

"Good fur you. Ye'r a girl ov pluck, if yer did cry. That story wound me all up. Wa'n't sure it wouldn't end with the'r killin' yer, off-hand; I'd 'a' thought so, sure, ef I hadn't bin thar, an' seen Kale trip up on his sure thing, jest at ther last minnit. Lucky fur him I hedn't heard yer story first. I'd 'a' held jest ez straight, but I'd 'a' laid that lead on another spot.

"Not bad fur a yonker, an' that's a fact," declared Old Handcart thoughtfully. "But, ther young lady has forgotten ter tell us what she wants us ter do fur her. Ef thar's ter be co-operashun ther size ov ther contract'll be re-

markable fur its heft; an' Lum an' me'll hev ter do all ther kerryin'."

The lip of the girl quivered, yet she managed to answer quite bravely:

"You have saved me from that man; I will ask you to do no more if you think there is no more you can do. Keep me here or turn me adrift, just as you choose; but oh, I ought to go to my father. He might be dying for want of me."

"Exa'kly, leetle gal; but you've furgit ter men'shun w'o yer father is; an' yer don't seem ter know ary too well whar he kin be found. Ef it war a straight trip ov some hundred mile, me an' Lum would be on hand; but thar's noom'rous minin' camps, with freequent leetle gal's fathers, sick ov ther fever. Kin we s'arch 'em all? 'Fraid not. Ther are too many, an' too fur. Draw 'em in ter a p'int, an' mebbe we kin give a weenty, teenty bit ov hope."

Old Handcart spoke in a gentle, insinuating way, but Faith could see that he was thinking of the weak part of her story. She hesitated to mention the name of her father, or give any precise account of where he might be found. Without these how could she expect to have these two aid her?

For a few seconds she sat with her hands clasped over her knees, in front of her, in silent thought. When she looked up again the expression of her face had changed.

"My name is Faith Ammersly, but my father is known as Hiram Hurd; and he was at a mining camp named Hard Luck. I do not know why he changed his name, but I never said anything about it before; and I hope you will not mention it, or take advantage of the knowledge; at least until I have seen him."

"Hiram Hurd? Hum!"

Under his breath spoke Old Handcart, and it was a narrow thing that he did not give a whistle of surprise. The intelligence was unexpected and perhaps unwelcome.

CHAPTER IV.

HANDCART GOES LISTENING.

"You know him, then," whispered Faith, anxiously. "You have heard of him," and perhaps can tell me whether he lives, or is dead? Why did I not speak his name sooner? Is he far from here? Can you take me to him?"

She was certain that Old Handcart recognized the name, and she was allowing her imagination to run away with her. If he had not interrupted her she would have poured out a flood of questions before allowing him time to answer the first one.

"Jest a minnit, leetle one. One thing et a time. I hev heard ther cognotum ov Hiram Hurd afore now, an' Hard Luck are not a thousand mile away. Fact are, a couple days' journey might annillate ther distans, an' you could jedge fur yerself a heap sight better ner I could answer fur ther rest. Ez fur ez I know, a week ago Hiram war livin', an' warn't in ary pertik'ler danger ov a mortul sickness. Me an' pard, hyer, hed sot out fur a comfortable spell all by ourselves alone. But, we're reasonerable white, an' don't intend ter throw off on a small child ov ther femiline perfession. We kin take yer ter Hard Luck, an' put yer in ther hands ov Hiram Hurd. Ef that's sotisfact'ry say ther word an' we'll start in ther mornin'."

There was no mistaking the honest feeling in the voice of Old Handcart, and Faith uttered a cry of delight.

"Oh, how fortunate it was for me that I met you! In your hands I will be safe. My troubles will soon be over. And if he is able, I know that father will pay you well for the time that you lose, and the trouble that you take. He must be able, too; for, from what he said in his last letters, he has been very successful. You shall not regret having befriended me."

"Don't rattle on too fast. We kin put yer through, no doubt; but so kin ther doctor pull teeth. I ain't sayin' but w'ot you'll hev a mighty tough time ov it afore it's all done. An' it 'pears ter me thet they wouldn't be playin' you foul fur nothin'. I dunno w'ot ter make ov it, but I reckon we'll find out when we git ter Hard Luck. Keep yer chin up, an' don't worry, though."

"I shall not. With you and Little Lum to take care of me I do not think there is much to fear; and as you know where to find my father what more could I ask?"

Handcart might have suggested a good deal more; but he did not care to alarm the girl. Believing Faith, as he did, he was inclined to think that something had gone wrong at Hard Luck. He had doubts about the illness of her father, but it seemed that it would be no unlikely thing if they found him dead. Unless he was, why should any one care to remove his daughter?

Little Lum was willing that his older friend should do the talking, and was in much the same notion. Hard Luck was a lawless place and there had been strange doings there. Hiram Hurd, a week or so before, was prosperous enough, but he would not be surprised at any story of what had happened to him in the mean time. He was sorry that they would have to take the back track, but glad to be of any service to Faith, to whom he had taken more than an or-

dinary liking. Now that it was settled that they were to espouse her cause—a thing that he intended to do from the first—he listened with some curiosity to Handcart as he questioned the little maid about the spot at which the camp of the previous evening had been made, and her wanderings since she had left it.

Faith was an observant child, and had the faculty of clearly presenting any impressions that had been made on her mind. In Handcart she had an exceptional hearer, who had little difficulty in making out the place she was attempting to describe.

"Jest ez I thort, Lummy. They sheared off'n ther trail. Meant ter drop ther leetle one, an' then go on. It don't seem so cl'ar whar they war goin' next; but p'raps ter Hard Luck, arter all. I got a kinder idea ter waitz over that way, an' try ter find out w'ot they are goin' ter do about it now. Kin be back afore mornin', an' by that time ther leetle one will be rested up enough ter start fur town."

"That means fur me ter stay hyer an' keep a eye open fur Kale Canyon, ef he comes this way. He won't keer ter give up ther ship tell he's sure he'll go down with it ef he stays."

"Bout ther size ov it. Ef I'm goin' it's time I war a-startin'. Mebbe I kin git a glimps ov Kale ez I go along. Ef I do, an' it looks a bit like mischief hyer I'll let yer know, regardless."

"An' it won't hurt anything ter know jest who's in that camp, along with Kale. Some day it'll be good ter have 'em down fine. So long, pard, ef yer calls that goin'. I'll go out, by an' by, ter see how ther land looks."

"Never mind ther outside. I'll look after it meself fur ther present. So long it are."

Without further leave-taking Old Handcart disappeared.

In her wanderings Faith had passed over a good deal of ground without making a corresponding progress. Of course, for a child, she had placed quite a distance between the camp and herself; but to a man like Old Handcart it seemed but a step, that he could take without minding, and have plenty of time to go a little out of the way to look after the desperado known as Kale Canyon.

It was almost dark, now, so that it would be necessary to act with care lest he should either stumble upon the desperado, and thus apprise him of his presence or else miss him altogether.

The chances were that Little Lum's trail had not been found, and in that case Kale would probably return to the camp to take counsel with his companions. The contradictory conclusions made the progress of the old man slow, since he was not one who took many chances unless there was an urgent necessity for doing so. As a result he dropped in behind Canyon, who had wearied himself with a fruitless search, and actually followed him back to his own camp without a suspicion that he was in the rear.

There was no guard of any kind, and Kale, sauntering up to the low burning camp-fire, threw himself wearily on the ground.

There was but one man to be seen, and he did not appear very cheerful. When Kale looked up as he addressed him, he could see that there was a scowl on his face.

"What's the matter with you, Gurley; and where are the rest? Haven't they got back from the hunt yet? I needn't ask whether they got on the trail of the Kid, because I was there, and didn't get a sight of them."

"Trail be eternally—ahem—condemned!" retorted Gurley, in a peculiar, whining tone. "It will be the ruination of us yet. They are letting that one slide, and trying to strike the other. There's two of them, now."

"What do you mean?" asked Kale, sharply, showing an immediate interest.

"I mean that Magdalena is missing, and a nice mess she will make of it. She took Jim's mustang, and a couple of the horses. If she finds the way as well as I think, she will be in Hard Luck long enough before we get there. What she will say there you can imagine. I don't want to. It's as bad for me as for the rest. And she knows who to ask for."

"How long has she been gone?" asked Kale, raising himself up with a promptness that showed he had almost forgotten that he was tired.

"That is what we don't know. She was gone when we got back, so the rest of them started out again, leaving me here to tell the news, when you came in. Perhaps they didn't want me along; but I can trust to Vernon not to harm the girl if they find her."

"And you sit there like a bump on a log? Did she tell you beforehand what she was going to do? Is it set up for you to throw us off, while she slips in to Hard Luck and sells us out? If I left a corpse here it would be all the safer. I'll stop the girl before she gets out of the timber, or head her off at town. I'll take an hour's rest, anyway, and then start for Hard Luck. If it is in the wood I must get to the camp before Magdalena does, and let the captain know what is coming."

"And if you meet her on the way—what then?"

"Then, perhaps, I will come back; unless I am nearer to Hard Luck than I am to this place."

"You mean that you will kill her, the same as you intended to the child. It will not do. Stop her if you can. Get there before her, and put the captain on his guard; but, Magdalena must not be harmed. I may be bound to the gang, hand and foot, yet I will fight for my own."

"Harm her? Bless your dear soul, no! I would not harm a hair on her beautiful head. But, all the same, I do not care to be met by Judge Lynch when I go into town. I always take good care of myself, and if any one suffers when I am doing it, so much the worse for them. They could keep out of the way."

Kale spoke with a sneer, but his hand covertly wandered near to the weapon in his belt, so as to be ready for any sudden attack by his companion.

For an instant Gurley looked dangerous; but he hesitated—made no reply—and then, turning abruptly, moved away, leaving Canyon alone by the side of the fire.

Old Handcart watched and listened. He could see that there was no good blood between these two men, and almost hoped that they would come to blows. When rogues fall out, the proverb has it, honest men get their dues. At least it would be a comfort to know that Kale Canyon had received his quietus, and would not be following the trail of Faith, toward Hard Luck.

But, Handcart was not an assassin, and he saw the cloud blow over, and the two settle down in silence, without a thought of interference on his part. Murderers though they might be, they had not as yet molested him, and he did not care to put them both to sleep in a permanent way, as he might easily have done. He thought he had learned all that he could here; and though it scarcely seemed enough to pay for his long tramp, it was time for him to think of returning to his own camp. He withdrew as cautiously as he had come, and when well out of hearing distance started off at a rapid pace.

"So, Magderlena bez took French leave?" he thought, as he strode off. "Frum w'ot Faith sez, she must be a sorter honest one, an' ef she are, it ain't hard ter see w'ot the game are she's up to. She'll git ter Hard Luck ahead ov 'em, an' find Hiram Hurd. He'll know, then, w'ot are goin' on hyer, an' I wouldn't wonder ef he don't come in this d'reeshun, allers s'posin' he's in conductshun ter travel. That's ther rub. We can't be throwin' away ther chances waitin' fur him. It's money somewheres ez are behind this racket, an' ef anything hez happened ter him ther leetle one orter be on ther ground. To-morrer mornin' we must start."

The journey was not so long nor so dangerous that he would worry much over the thought of it. To be sure, he would have liked to reach the town ahead of Kale Canyon; but as that seemed an impossibility he left it to Magdalena to try to do so.

The miles between the two camps were traversed, and Old Handcart at last stood under the branches of the tree through which he reached his favorite hiding-place. He looked around him and everything seemed as it was when he went away.

Then he made his way into the cave to find—that it was empty! On the rude table was a slip of paper by the side of the still burning lamp, and on it was scrawled:

"Hed ter start sudden; foller us ter Hard Luck!"

CHAPTER V. MAGDALENA.

For a short time after Old Handcart had left the cave the boy and girl talked. Lum was by nature somewhat inquisitive; and there was much about the story of Faith that he thought would bear explanation. It was easier for him to get the girl to talking now that Handcart was away, and she spoke more frankly than she had yet done. It was not hard for Lum to understand that the change of name bothered the girl; and that though she had unbounded confidence in her father she was afraid to speak freely to any one lest she might injure him.

Lum was keen, and wise in the ways of the world. He knew that a change of name was common enough; and that there was generally a reason for it. The reason in this case might be that there were enemies on the trail of Hiram Hurd, whom he was trying to elude. He wove together quite a romance while she was talking to him; and then felt inclined to go out and look around while he digested it.

Outside of the cave he found everything quiet. It would be a long time before Old Handcart could be expected back, and until he came the boy would be in ignorance of what Kale Canyon was doing. He might, indeed, find out something if that unworthy came prying around in the neighborhood, though he did not think that there was much danger of it now, since the sun had set, and the shadows of twilight were beginning to give place to the darkness of night. If Kale was to find his trail he must have done it before now.

Still, he thought it would do no harm to look around him a little, following back his course for some distance. He slid down from the tree,

and stepped off silently. After he had gone some distance he stopped suddenly. He heard the tramp of horses, approaching at a steady gallop.

Whoever the riders were they were wasting no time in trying to read a blind trail. That much the boy was certain of; but it might be Kale Canyon and his companions, after all. He dropped into cover at once, and waited to see more.

The boy moved so swiftly and so silently that he had no idea he had been seen, and it was only when the steps came directly toward him that he thought such might be the case. For a moment he was undecided whether to run away, or challenge the party before they got too close.

He took another look, however; and decided to do neither. Two of the horses were riderless, and the third was ridden by a female.

The horses came to a halt near where Lum lay concealed, and he could imagine that the woman was looking around with a keen, close scrutiny. After a little he heard her call softly:

"Faith! Faith! It is I, Magdalena. Be not afraid. I have come to rescue you."

Lum remembered the name, and had no doubt but that this was Faith's friend; but he did not at once answer her. He was not sure that she was alone.

"I am sure that I saw her. Who else could be skulking around here? Foolish girl! She must know that I would not harm her; and that she will die if she does not find a friend. Faith! Where are you? I am risking my life to find you. I have left the rest, and will take you to your father. There is no time to waste. Come to me at once."

"All right, miss. I hev plenty ov faith; but I ain't exac'ly ther chicken y'er lookin' fur. Le'ss talk a leetle. Mebbe we kin come ter some sort a understandin'."

Out from his hiding-place stepped the boy, who was convinced that the danger was slight, and that Magdalena was alone. He could see her form limned against the night sky, and two riderless horses by her side.

"Be careful, there! Come no nearer till I see who you are," answered Magdalena, startled by the unexpected appearance of the lad.

"What do you want?"

"Didn't know ez I war a wantin' nothin'. Don't recollect addressin' a lady ov your dimen-shuns. Thor't it war t'other way. Ef yer hev no Faith, an' don't want no Faith, jest wiggle along, an' I'll furgit I ever met yer; but I sh'dn't wonder ef it would be a heap sight ther biggest mistake yever made."

"What do you know about Faith? I begin to understand. You have found the child. Where is she? There is no time to lose. If they get us now it will be murder, sure enough. I have risked my own life to save her. Perhaps she has told you her story. Where are your friends—for I hardly suppose that you are here by yourself."

"Party much alone—me an' Faith. An' I guess I kin trust you ef you ain't afeared ov me, tho' it makes a kinder a mix. Kale Canyon might look a thunderin' long time afore he'd find out our lay-out; but he's bound ter strike yourn ef he looks fur it. Three hosses makes a nice outfit but mighty hard ter hide. Ef yer got ary thing ter say ter ther kid ye better say it hyer, an' I kin Kerry ther news. Don't keer 'bout gittin' a waggin road opened out ary nearer to ther place she's stowed. 'I wouldn't be safe fur her; an' it'd be perfeck death fur me—unless we went in ter killin' hullsake."

"More the reason why you should lead me to her at once, so that I can get her away from here as soon as possible. By to-morrow it may be too late."

"Ain't afeared ov it. There's grub ernuf on hand ter last a month, an' all creation couldn't find ther lay-out ef nobody give it away. Ef you hev'n't ary thing more ter say 'spect I'd better be sayin' good-night, an' gittin' back ter kiver. Jest keep on a-goin', an' you'll find plenty ov room. Give my regards ter Kale w'en yer sees him, an' say he can't come in."

Lum turned with a swagger, and seemed to be about to move away. He did not distrust the young woman, but he was not sure that she had not been followed; and he did not care to trust her with the secret of the hidden retreat. In fact, he was a little puzzled how to act to provide for her safety and yet keep her within reaching distance until Handcart came.

Magdalena gave utterance to a little cry of impatience. She understood the position as well as the boy, and did not know what to do. He evidently knew where Faith was, and it was important that she should see her at once.

"Cannot you trust me? You must understand that I am her friend, and that when I say it is important you ought not to waste time, if you know where she is; but lead me to her at once."

"Strikes me you wants ther confedens' all on one side. Open up yerself, an' ef there's ernuf in what yer says ter jesterfy, I kin say s'uthin' back. What yer want ov Faith? She's safe with us; kin yer say same ef she's turned over ter you?"

"I begin to see," said Magdalena, slowly. "There is some reason in what you say. I

must trust you first of all. If I was sure that you could understand the importance of the case I might confide in you. The child is not the only one to be made safe. There are others in danger of their lives. What did she tell you? Did she mention my name?"

"She jest made a clean breast ov it, so yer needn't be afeared. Sed you war her best frien', an' that Kale Canyon an' ther rest were layin' out ter send her over ther range."

"It was Kale Canyon that was at the bottom of it all; that I will swear to. If she had not run away I would have protected her, even at the risk of my life. There was one other in that camp who would have done as I said—one they would not have dared to touch. But it is as well that she went; otherwise, there are facts that I would never have known until it was too late. A blow will be aimed at the life of her father; and if he is not warned, by this time to-morrow he will be a dead man. It is a long ride to Hard Luck, and I must know who to look for when I get there. She was always a silent thing, saying nothing of her father; but with his life at stake she must speak. When I knew this I stole away from those whom I had called my friends; and if they could find me now I believe they would kill me. Judge then, how much in earnest I was, and am."

"Now yer' beginnin' ter shout. We ain't holdin' ther girl a pris'ner, an' I'm willin' ter bring her whar ye kin have a talk with her, ez long ez ther' ain't no reesk. Down yonder are ez good a spot ter lay low ez I kin point to. Stop thar tell I come back ag'in, an' ef she sez' ther word I'll bring her to yer."

The offer was accepted in a very few words, and Lum started off to confer with the girl. He had no doubt but that she would be willing enough to meet Magdalena; yet he would not run any risks; and he intended to approach the spot very carefully. It was not that he feared Magdalena; but those who might be in pursuit of Magdalena.

Once out of sight and sure that his movements could not be followed, Lum lost no time in making his way back to Faith. She was awake; and evidently glad to see him. When he told her about Magdalena she hesitated. Once in a haven of rest, and though it might seem irksome she hesitated to leave it. But when he spoke of the threatened danger to her father; and that it was Magdalena's wish to find him and warn him, and that she wished to see her to learn from her how it best could be done, Faith was as anxious for the meeting as the other. In a good deal less time than he had expected he was on his way back, accompanied by the girl.

There was still no evidence of any pursuit, and without much waiting or watching the interview began. The two females rushed into each other's arms on sight, and before Magdalena had been talking a minute Faith saw, or thought she saw, that she must go along to Hard Luck.

At the proposition Lum scratched his head thoughtfully, for he did not know what to say. It was important that Hiram Hurd should be notified of the rascality on foot, but how it was best to be done, with a due regard to the safety of Faith, was more than he could at once see.

"You two ain't no more fit ter go alone than nothin'. Kale ain't no man's fool, an' when he finds this young lady are a-missing, you bet he'll take it all in afore half a quarter ov a minnit hez passed; an' he'll light out ter head her off. I'm jest a solid frien' when I tie to ary one; an' it 'pears ter me I've tied to this hyer leetle one. Ther long an' short ov it are, thet ef yer must go I guess I better go along. I'll go back, leave word fur Old Handcart, an' then we three'll make the tallest kind ov tracks fur ther settlements. With Little Lum ter steer yer through you'll go along a-hoopin'. Ther old man can't deject when he knows it's a case ov life er death."

"But do you know the way?" asked Magdalena, looking the boy over as well as she was able in the uncertain light.

"To reach it myself I must go back to the trail; and there will be hard riding to do, and a deal of risk, as the boy has said, to get there ahead of Kale Canyon."

"Jest like a book; daytime er night, rain er shine, it don't make a differbitterence. Yer can't lose Little Lum. An' ef Kale stan's acrost ther track, somebody'll be apt ter git hurt."

Thus it was that Old Handcart, upon his return to the retreat, found only the note of the boy.

By that time the three were miles away, riding straight and hard to reach Hard Luck before Kale Canyon.

CHAPTER VI. CLARENCE MAYCROFT.

FOR a few moments after finding the note of the boy Old Handcart remained in silent thought, his head bent down, and his fingers digging at the roots of his hair, in search of inspiration.

There was a puzzle for him to solve. Would it be better to follow at once, or should he wait until morning? Or should he drop all thought of the matter out of his mind, and allow Lum, on his return, to tell him all that it had amounted to? He had been interested in Faith, but now

that she had chosen to remove herself from his protection he did not feel so loudly called upon to leave his own affairs to look after hers.

Yet he knew what Kale Canyon was, and could not get it out of his head that he ought to keep an eye on him.

"Ef he follers ther' may be hot work. Ther boy kin take keer ov hisself in ther open, but Kale are a sneak from 'way back, an' ef he got ther drop on him frum behind he wouldn't stop ter pull trigger. An' Lum are my pard. Mebbe it's my dooty ter hold ther drop on Kale on-beknownst ter all ov 'em. Ef they git ter Hard Luck, all right. An' ef Kale ketches up an' tries ary monkey shines, Ole Handcart 'll be thar. That settles it. Ter think ov all that tramp jest fur fun! Makes me fatygued ter consider. Good thing I'm tough er I'd never reach Hard Luck."

The old man was accustomed to long tramps. His muscles were tireless, and he had the speed of an Indian runner when the occasion demanded. He would not have troubled himself over the distance to be traversed if he had not just been over much of the same ground already. He reasoned with himself a little longer. Kale had said that he would rest for an hour, and then take the trail for Hard Luck. Did he mean all that he said?

"Not jest so ondoubtedly. P'raps it's ez like he'll take ther trail fur ther gal they called Magdalena. Kin he find it? Ef so, all a feller'd hev ter do would be ter wait, an' he'd come ambling right inter his arms. Shell I wait, er shan't I? Er s'posin' I jest keep along after ther three. Ef he finds ther trail he'll find me betwixt 'em, an' that's about what Handcart wants. That's ther way ter work ther riffle, an' I reckon I'll take a half hour more ter a rest an' then set out. By that time Kale will be well on ther way."

In something like half an hour, accordingly, Handcart dropped cautiously from the tree and followed the route taken by Lum and Faith when they left the spot. It would have been hard for any one else to have discovered the spot where they met Magdalena, but Lum had left certain signs behind to indicate his own course, and Magdalena had not endeavored to hide her own. It was, henceforth, a race for Hard Luck, and she did not doubt what the result would be, provided she did not miss the route.

Kale must have lost time either in starting, or in searching for Magdalena's trail. It took him a long time to reach the point where she had halted to speak with Little Lum. The young woman had wandered some and Kale saw it with considerable satisfaction. He thought that she was uncertain of her course, and that he could overtake her long enough before she reached Hard Luck. He did not understand that she was searching for Faith; and he was only somewhat surprised that he had not come across her trail in his own wanderings. When he came to where she had halted for some time he was puzzled. She had not gone into camp there; what could she have been waiting for? He thought of the boy and the girl; but smiled at the idea. They were doubtless miles away. Lum left no trace when he joined her, and Kale was not such an adept of the art of trailing as to note the difference in the footsteps of the horses since they had received a slight additional weight.

One thing was certain, however. Magdalena had finally turned her face toward Hard Luck, and was traveling at a faster rate of speed, and straight as an arrow toward the mark. She was hesitating no longer, and a hard race was before him if he meant to reach the camp first. He might not have to waste so much time following the different indications of the land, and searching here in the moonlight to make himself sure that his intuitions had not deceived him, but daylight would reach her first on the broader and better trail, and it was uncertain how much start she had of him. Besides that, she was the better mounted of the two, and if he had not trusted to his own superior powers of endurance he might have felt hopeless of overtaking her.

It was but a little after daybreak when he came upon a camp so unexpectedly that his first knowledge of it was when his horse snorted with alarm, and attempted to dash to one side.

At once his rifle was in his hand, ready to swing forward to his shoulder, while with his other hand he brought his steed under some control. The rapid glance that he cast at the spot from which the animal had shied was, however, sufficient to convince him that there was no immediate danger. At least, the man he could see, peering at him through a rift in the shrubbery, did not appear to be an enemy to any honest man, and he drew in at once.

"Come up if you want to!" called a pleasant voice, as he turned to retrace his steps. "No tricks on travelers, and you will be welcome. It is just time for breakfast, and perhaps if we swap larders we will both be the better for it. And if yours is clean empty perhaps mine will serve at a pinch for both."

At the same time the hand of the speaker was near to the revolver which he had almost drawn at the sounds of the nearing stranger.

"Couldn't suit me better," answered Kale, with what seemed perfect frankness, at the same time throwing himself carelessly from his horse.

"I had been figuring to hold up for a bite when I reached the water. Have you been here long?"

"All night," answered the young man, looking over his visitor without showing any particular marks of disapprobation.

"Dumped down here about sunset last night, and must have slept like a log. I intended to be on the trail an hour ago."

"Did you hear any one on horseback go by in the night, or about sun-up?"

"Not a soul. If any one had come near I think I would have been wide enough awake. I am not often surprised in my camp. I heard you coming long before you were in sight, and though I did not expect any enemies here I thought I might as well see what you were like before I let you know that there was any one here."

"That is strange," said Kale, thoughtfully. He did not doubt the word of the stranger, but he was almost certain that the course of the fugitive had led very near to this spot. He had seen traces of the horses not far back, and naturally they would have passed about by the route he had himself taken.

"Wait a few moments. I was sure I was on the right course. If I was mistaken I may as well make a rest of it here as anywhere. But I had thought I would overtake the party before long. I will leave my horse here and take a cast about on foot."

With daylight to aid him it did not require any great skill to discover what Kale soon found out. Magdalena had been following the very course he had supposed, but at a hundred yards away had stopped short, waited a little, and then made a detour, approaching no nearer to the spot where the young man lay. And from the look of the track he was sure that the girl was still several hours ahead of him. The young man watched the proceedings with a curious eye, following silently until there was no more doubt in the matter. Perhaps he thought if this stranger was not as friendly as he seemed it would be as well not to let him out of his sight.

"Pretty evident that your friends—if such they were—did not want to wake me up. Much obliged for their care, but I sometimes think that I would sooner have visitors who came so near a little less careful. I would not feel quite so nervous over them when I discovered their presence. Any particular reason why they should want to avoid my track? Or are they no friends of yours after all?"

He placed a peculiar emphasis on the word, "friends," and smiled as he spoke. The inference was that he had begun to think that if the tracks were not made by friends they might show the traces of enemies.

Kale for once was frank.

"You are mistaken. If it is the person I hope, it may be more than a friend but a great deal less than an enemy. No man would have been so timid. I am searching for a woman who wandered from our train. I found the trail, and followed it as well as I could through the night. By daylight it will be easier. Besides, she will probably halt soon for a rest. It is a question now with me whether I had better not press on, instead of accepting your invitation."

"A woman! That might account for it, though how she discovered my camp is more than I can understand. If I was mounted I would go with you, until she was found. It is a desolate region for a woman. Yet it seems to me that I see the tracks of more than one horse. Perhaps she has met with friends from the train. Were there others in search of her?"

"Yes, but they have not found her. She is alone. The other horses followed and she has kept them together. I shall have to stop before I overtake her, anyhow, so a camp here will be no loss of time. Half an hour will not be lost. I am tired, and so is my horse."

He spoke with the air of one who had suddenly made up his mind that it was better to run a risk for the sake of an ultimate good, and threw himself wearily down on the ground at the spot where he had first seen the stranger, to which they had returned. His horse had already found water, and was now browsing languidly.

"Not a bad decision I take it," said the stranger, cheerfully. "I will open my haversack, and when you feel like it we will investigate its contents. Nothing very extra to be found in it, no doubt. At Hard Luck they go in for the substantial, and I did not think it worth while to look for the delicacies of the season to put into my knapsack when I couldn't find them while I was a fixture there. My name is Clarence Maycroft, and I am prospecting on my own hook—more for the sake of health and adventure than through expectation of putting much money in my purse. I went into Hard Luck to rest and refit, get some letters and be a little nearer to humanity. After all, one gets tired of oneself. There is nothing like a change of diet to keep up the appetite."

It was hard to say whether the young man felt as friendly as he was evidently trying to act. When on his good behavior Kale Canyon could talk as glibly as any one, and unless a stranger

searched his eyes he might not find him more unprepossessing than the average rover to be met with in such places. Kale did not suspect him, and as Maycroft appeared to be journeying from instead of toward Hard Luck, there was no reason why he should not answer his frankness somewhat in kind. They breakfasted amicably together, and Kale went off on the trail at a canter, leaving the young man lounging where he first met him, a pipe in his mouth, and a smile on his face.

Hardly had Kale Canyon got out of sight, however, when the aspect of Clarence Maycroft changed. He emptied his pipe, gathered up his belongings, and was ready to move before Kale had gone a mile.

"Thank you, Mr. Kale Canyon," he muttered. "You have served me better than you thought, or I am very widely mistaken. You have learned little; and I hope that I have learned much. Your nature is too plainly stamped on your face for you to win much confidence from me. A woman lost from a wagon train—and Kale Canyon with that train. I wish I had dared to ask him about Adam Gurley, but I dared not say a word that might cause him to suspect my interest. A thousand to one that the woman is Magdalena; and that she is fleeing from this same villainous Kale Canyon. If I thought he would overtake her before she reaches Hard Luck, I believe that I would have shot him where he stood. Thank you, Kale. My 'journey' has come to a sudden end, and I am ready to take the back track. It will bring a terrible day of reckoning for you if I find that anything has happened to Magdalena when I reach Hard Luck."

CHAPTER VII.

THE WILD HORSE FROM RAKESTRAW PRANCES IN.

HARD LUCK was a mining-camp, that had its ups and downs, and at this time seemed to be running on a dead level, no one prospering very much, but the industrious portion of the inhabitants just about holding their own.

There was another section of the population who seemingly were not particularly industrious, and yet it was conceded that they were doing rather better than fairly well.

There was Posey Peebles, for instance, who kept the Spotted Elk, a saloon which had the best run of custom of any in the place. If he was not coining money, public opinion was very widely off from the truth. And yet, he was the laziest looking mortal who ever drew breath within the limits of the camp. To be sure, he had men to do his work for him, and these men had little rest, day or night; but Posey generally sat in his great arm-chair at the end of the bar until midnight, and through his half-closed eyes sleepily surveyed his patrons without giving the least sign that he was interested in what was going on around him. Now and then he would wake up sufficiently to bid some favorite mortal the time of day or night, or even to tell a short story that generally had enough of the ridiculous in it to make those who heard it laugh, but he soon relapsed into his normal silence, and remained the object of his patrons' admiration and respect.

Now and then Judge Ewing had something to say to him in a more confidential manner than the rest; but as that was the judge's way no one ever noticed it particularly, or considered that there was any business connection between the two.

This evening the judge came in a little late.

As he entered the door he gave a keen glance around him from under his eyebrows; and as his eyes fell upon one face that was there, if any one had been suspiciously watching him it would have been seen that he gave something like a start. Then he strolled on as gay and smiling as usual. He had a word for this one and that; and it was some time before he had worked around to Posey, who meantime gave no evidence that he noticed him coming. A few steps away he halted to speak to a fine looking man, who did not seem to be particularly charmed at the meeting, since he listened with something like impatience, as the judge laid his hand on his shoulder, and bending forward addressed him in a tone so low that it was almost a whisper.

"Glad to see you out again, Hiram. I just returned from the Gulch, but when I heard that you were off-color I thought I would drop in during the evening and see how you were getting along. Bad time to be on the sick list, just when things begin to look lovely. If I can help you out in any way you know you can call on me for all I am worth. Let me know if you need me at any time and you can be sure that I will be there."

As he spoke the judge insinuated his hand into that of the listener, and looked as though he might be the dearest friend he had on all the earth.

"Thanks, Ewing; but everything is going all right, now; and I have nothing to ask for. If I need you, though, I will not hesitate to call on you. I just dropped in a moment to see how things were running. A man must have a little relaxation, you know."

"Yes, yes, and this sort of thing is better than nothing. Will you take something?"

"Not to-night, thank you. I am not in shape for it. Some other time, perhaps: I was just thinking of leaving."

"I understand; all right," said the judge, and then passed on.

With a nod here, and a word there, Ewing reached the side of the proprietor. Posey looked at him with a lazy smile.

"Hed a talk with Hiram, eh? He's not a bad sort to talk with. Square man, too, square as a die. If you had him for a pard, now, you could make things hum all around, eh?"

"Right you are, Mr. Peebles. If Hard Luck had a few more such men she would have to change her name, without a doubt."

And then, dropping his face and voice at the same instant, he whispered:

"Put up the sign for hard work. There is to be a meeting to-night, and I want a couple more of the boys that can be depended on for something that is not child's play."

"Correct as always," answered Posey in his laziest tone.

"He's not the best patron of the Spotted Elk, but it's not because he holds himself too good for the crowd. He don't care for such things. But if he had his way he would make money plenty for those who do, and an angel could do no more. As you say, he is doing a great deal for Hard Luck, and Hard Luck ought to do a great deal for him. Probably it will. When he dies it ought to give him the biggest kind of a monument if they can't do anything for him sooner. Excuse me. There is Long Pete, and I have a word to say to him."

Posey's gaze was drifting slowly around the room, and now rested a moment on an individual who had just entered. It would have been hard to tell whether he made a sign or not, but Pete gave a slight nod, and after that the eyes of the two men did not meet again.

The judge had nothing more to say to Peebles, but turned and was lost in the heart of the crowd. At the tables along the side of the room several games of cards were in progress, and more than once he was invited to take a seat and a hand, but he carelessly refused in every case. It was seldom that he took a place at the card tables, and when he did it was more for amusement than for profit, first-class game though it was that he always played.

Several times did Ewing stop to have a brief conversation with some acquaintance, but there was nothing in these conversations that was particularly interesting, and he was moving off to leave the place when a man came stumbling through the open door who attracted his attention. He halted, slipped back to one side of the room and watched with interest, though he was careful to so shade his face that any peculiar expression on it might not be noticed.

The new-comer was something of an oddity in dress, and his manner was enough to draw attention to him. After he had once announced his presence the judge needed no excuse for looking in his direction.

In the first place he was dressed in a suit of flaming calico, all the colors of the rainbow being represented, but red being predominant. Outside of the long loose coat that was made after the fashion of a linen duster, was a belt fairly bristling with knives and pistols, of various make and dimensions, and his head was surmounted by a peaked, white hat, making him look a good deal like a modern circus clown gone mad. His long peaked face had its peculiar effect heightened by being altogether shorn of hair save for a goatee, which hung down well over his breast, and there was a cavernous look in his deep-set, black eyes, that hardly agreed with his manner as he made his way toward the bar.

"Hoop la! Here we come, we, us and company! Calico Dick, the Wild Horse from Rakestraw, ready to trot, gallop or run for blood, stamps or fun! Set them up there and the best men of Hard Luck take hold. Those that don't drink take a see-gar; and those that don't do neither can fight or go home. Ha-ha-ha! Listen to the thunder and the shouting! The war horse neighs—where's the anamile that thinks he ought to nicker?"

Posey Peebles looked the invader over sleepily. He had settled himself back for a nap, and this sort of thing interfered with it. Still if it was going to afford any amusement for his patrons, and would not be likely to lead to too much damage, he could stand it for a while. If he had made a sign some of his men would have cautioned the stranger, if they had done no worse. As long as Posey was quiescent they were perfectly willing to let him rage.

Perhaps that was none the better for the stranger. If Posey's men had taken a hand it would have barred every one else out. So long as he did not turn a finger, one way or the other, the man who announced himself as Calico Dick was fair game for anybody who wanted him.

And at the Spotted Elk there was generally some one who wanted a stranger. Even a general invitation to the bar could only delay the inevitable; and when that invitation was a challenge it sometimes precipitated it.

In this case there was a movement of all hands

toward a common center and that center was the stranger. It was a silent one, but he seemed to think that it implied an acceptance of his invitation. He glanced over the crowd as it came, and then turned to Johnny Davis, the nearest man on the other side of the counter:

"Whoopee! Jest see 'em come! Set out their vanities as they name 'em and look to the war-horse, the wild horse, the woolly horse, and you'll get the ready, John."

"Excuse me, mister, but I don't own this she-bang and I'm not taking risks. Cash goes, every time, and poor old Trust died long ago. You can count up the noses of these friends of yours and put down the collateral. I'm not treating the house, and that is what it would amount to if the funds should fall short when the time came to pay up. It's the rule of the establishment with strangers."

Johnny told the simple truth when he said all this. Posey Peebles was never very fast asleep, and in spite of the lazy good nature which beamed in his face he held his men to a strict account.

But, Johnny might have said his say in a more pleasant manner. It was all well enough to protect himself, but to offend a possible patron in such a deliberate manner seemed to a good many—especially of the thirstier souls—to be without rhyme or reason.

There were others who thought there must be some reason for it, and that the mystery would be cleared up before the end of the evening. They had not seen the almost imperceptible sign given by Ewing, or they might have understood that for some reason he wanted the stranger allowed the chance to spread himself.

The Wild Horse from Rakestraw gave a snort or two, in a manner strictly true to nature. He worked his elbows in a way that suggested he wanted more room, and curvetted and pranced around in the limited circle which was open, all the time keeping his eyes fixed upon Johnny.

"And it is to me—to Calico Dick, the saddle-less steed of the great pampas, the mustang of the higher altitudes—that such language is addressed! As though I was a common tramp! As though I was a pauper! As though I wasn't three times over the man with a million, who has come down to Hard Luck to give it a boom. Collateral! Whoughee! Here's the Simon-pure article itself—enough to buy your one-horse little rum-hole twice over. Gaze on the solid cash and then go wild."

With his left hand he thumped down a fat wallet on the bar, and bursting it open with the stroke a thick wad of greenbacks, of large denominations was exposed. And with his right hand, in almost the same time, he laid upon the counter in front of him a "navy six", while he continued his address in a tone that was harsh and stern:

"And the money says that I can take the straps off of the best man here with the other thing; or all goes in a bet that you take water: set 'em up for the house yourself, or go over the range a-flying. I'm mild as mother's milk when you come at me the right way; but when you try to dock his tail, and clip his hair, the Wild Horse is a holy horror. What are you going to do about it—flinch or fight?"

CHAPTER VIII.

CALICO DICK OFFERS SOME SUGGESTIONS.

It was evident that if the Wild Horse had not come in there for a difficulty he at least had no intention of trying to dodge one when it came his way. Some had thought that Johnny had acted pretty rough, but there could be no question about his getting as good as he had given. Davis was of the fighting kind, and the prospects for trouble never had looked better in the Spotted Elk, at that stage of the game.

Through half-closed eyes Posey Peebles watched the proceedings. A word from him would have quieted the ruction, or opened the flood-gates of Pandemonium. He did not give it; but left his assistant to his own devices.

Johnny did not change a particle in color, and his manner was just the same, as he answered:

"It is not necessary to do either. If you want to deposit that wallet as security, whisky is free for the house. If you want to keep on with your bluff you will be bounced in the jerk of a lamb's tail. Make up your mind what you want to do, and make it up mighty sudden, as we don't stop to think very long here when the tough citizen tries to take the house."

"Hear him talk about bouncing the Wild Horse from Rakestraw! Whoughee! Fling your riatas if you think you can rope him. There will be men out of the saddle so quick it will make your head swim. Come for me quick, afore I kick over the dasher, and bust the whole machine!"

If his words were addressed to Johnny his eyes were open for any sign of interference from other directions. There was a quick shifting of his glances, scarcely to be noticed save by a keen observer. It was this that convinced the judge that the stranger understood the position, and was not half as reckless as he appeared. He might be bent on a row, but he did not intend to be taken unawares. And he had acted with a

certain amount of prudence, since he produced his revolver, and challenged Johnny to try conclusions with it, but there was no flourish of firearms, such as would justify the man who got the drop in shooting him down. Ewing thought it was time to interfere if he did not want the thing to go further at present—and for reasons of his own he did not—he edged out of the crowd so quietly that his coming was scarcely to be noted; and placed his hand lightly on the shoulder of the gentleman from Rakestraw.

"My dear sir, let me assure you that no insult has been intended, and that the party behind the bar is only too happy to do business at all times with responsible individuals. Allow me to introduce you, and I think you will find Johnny Davis just as pleasant a gentleman as you ever laid eyes on."

"Introduce—thunder! Ain't that introduction enough? And there's heaps more of it where that came from. When a capitalist strikes Hard Luck, if his money can't speak for him, it's no wonder the blame little huddle of shanties don't grow."

"Exactly, my friend; and your money has been talking for you pretty loud, or Hard Luck would have been heard from before now. If it is sport you are after, of course I have no particular call to interfere; but as a citizen anxious for the welfare of the camp, I do not care to have a stranger misunderstand our position here, even if he has not a cent. Our friends are waiting to join you; Johnny has his hand on the vial of their choice; and everything will be lovely. If that is not satisfactory, Mr. Davis will no doubt take a promenade with you to some appropriate spot outside; or a dozen of our leading men will only be too happy to introduce themselves singly, or all in a body. When fun has once been started, it is generally a go-as-you-please affair, and the man who has the least friends comes out the worst."

Calico Dick listened so attentively that it was ludicrous. When the judge ceased speaking he clasped his hands, rolled his eyes up fervently, and uttered a loud snort of rejoicing. Then he pranced around in front of the judge, backward and forward, gave a couple more of his peculiar nickers, and ended by extending his hand:

"Put it there, my friend. The horse that's wild and woolly takes no back stall for any man living; but he's open to reason, and knows a gentleman when he sees him. Suppose you run this thing as it ought to be run until I get down to the ways of the town. There is the necessary coin. Call them all up, the same way I was trying to do, and pay expenses if it takes the pile. I am going to put myself solid with Hard Luck, or sink a fortune. Perhaps, when I get through with that, they will let me start right into business, and if there won't be a boom for corner lots, I want to know."

Now that the judge had taken the matter in hand, the mutterings from those in the rear, who had been watching the affair with an evident desire to take a hand in, ceased; and on the surface all was good-fellowship. The general invitation was refused by few, and Calico Dick stood at the head of the long line at the bar. He was snorting, and curvetting his neck, without any apparent sign that he was conscious of the fact that he had been taken down a peg or two.

"And now that we are all friends together," remarked the judge, as he placed his emptied glass upon the bar, "perhaps you would tell us in what particular line of business you intend to engage here that will start Hard Luck to booming. We understand that you are a public-spirited individual, with vast capital and undoubted energy; but we fail to see where the opening is for either. To us the ground seems to be pretty well covered already."

Ewing spoke in a soberly earnest tone, and as though he meant every word that he said. If it had been any one else there might have been a general burst of laughter, for the opinion of the man in calico was not a flattering one. If he was not a natural-born fool, who had managed by some wonderful bit of luck or rascality to accumulate a little money, he was probably a Cheap John, or a fake of some kind, whose stay would be ephemeral, and who would grab at all he could see, and then leave between two days. They listened with interest to hear what would be the answer.

"That's just it. A man never sees his nose—it's too close to his eyes. When some one else holds up the looking-glass it's there, sure enough. If I held up the glass it wouldn't take you all long to see, and then where would I be in the rush? Excuse me; but just now, till I get the scheme all laid out, and the wires ready to pull, that's my little secret. I'm stopping at the Great Metropolitan, though, and if, in the morning, any one thinks he would like to go in partners with the Wild Horse from Rakestraw let him come around. I want one, good, solid man that belongs in the town, to help me pull the ropes. Capital no object, as long as he has a heap of sand, and can keep a close mouth in his head. Then, when he and I get matched in double harness, and hitch to the old chariot of wealth, we'll just make it roll, and don't you forget it."

"When that time comes I don't think I will, or any one else," laughed the judge.

"I hope you will get some poor, but deserving individual, with plenty of what you call sand, to go in with you. I had some hopes that you might have something that would suit me, but after what you say I am afraid I would not fill the bill. Look around among the boys to-night, and perhaps you may strike the right fellow for your money. If not, let me know, to-morrow; and perhaps I can introduce you to a partner. I must be going now; but I have no hesitation in recommending you to Johnny, here, as a worthy individual, and good for what you order as long as you don't interview the tiger, or tackle some of the lights of the Spotted Elk at short-cards. So-long. I hope to hear soon that Hard Luck is booming, in spite of its name."

With that Judge Ewing bowed, turned away, and took his departure, without a soul in the house being able to tell, from anything he said, what his opinion really was of the stranger.

On the surface everything looked lovely, but that was no sign that the trouble would not begin again on the slightest provocation. If the crowd was good natured on the surface there was no telling what might be underneath, and it was just possible that the Wild Horse recognized this fact, for he certainly toned down the exuberance of his feelings, and subsided into just as ordinary a looking man as his peculiar appearance would allow him to be.

As soon as the judge had taken his departure his place was supplied by half a dozen questioners, who were in the best of spirits, but whether with, or at, the stranger, remained to be seen.

"Hard Luck's allers glad ter welcome gents such ez you be," remarked Long Pete, in a confidential sort of way, gently edging in front of the rest. "And when a man comes with plenty of stamps, and looks around for a pard, it's only too hard not ter take a dozen. Ef I had an idea what yer game was it's like ez not I'd be trying ter talk hard work, an' plenty ov profit, myself. You wouldn't like ter give a hint, now would yer?"

"Just as soon give a hint as not. Hints don't hurt, and I never heard of any one being hung for taking one. A horse, now, is a different matter. There's something uncomfortable about the idea, and when a fellow gets to dwelling on it there is apt to be signs of a mortal sickness in the distance, that comes nearer in heap quick time. It's a business that I despise."

There was a subdued snicker somewhere in the room; but Long Pete, looking around, failed to see from whence it came; and Calico Dick was the picture of innocence. How could he know that Pete had once got into a snarl about a missing horse, and was cut down by some pards after he had hung long enough to have only a flickering breath of life left him? But whether the stranger knew of it or not, he was making an enemy of a man who was apt to make things very uncomfortable for the objects of his hatred. The wonder was that he did not draw at once. Instead of showing anger he smiled, a little wickedly, perhaps, and went on with the conversation:

"My idear to ther dot; an' I'll take it ez gospel truth instea1 ov that hint you war talkin' about. Mebbe, if you'd tell us a few more things you don't b'lieve in we could guess some ov them you did."

"How would it strike you if I was to say that I was on the detective lay; and all I needed was a good partner? There's a heap of money in it. First you get pay by the day; then you get the reward for catching the thief; and then there is big money in standing in with him and letting him get away. There's big money in the racket; and in all creation there's not a spot where the racket can be worked for more wealth than in Hard Luck. The surrounding country has its advantages; and by a little judicious advertising we could gather in a swarm of agents to work the roads around it. 'Headquarters Far West Detective Agency; Central Office at Hard Luck; Manager, Calico Dick of Rakestraw!' How does that sound? Just think of the glory, to say nothing of the coin."

"That's the kind of a man we are all looking for, an' ef that's yer lay you couldn't be more welcome. Sounds like a hint, anyhow. Ayrthin' more ter purpose?"

"Thousands of things, all of them more or less to the advantage of yours truly. Why, I have schemes enough to put every man, woman and child in Hard Luck to work, at a good paying business—and capital enough to start them. Don't you make any mistake. I'm the Wild Horse from Rakestraw; and when I go into the race I come to stay, and am bound to win. Take my Compound Fluid Extract of Tar, Boneset and Stylopodium. Cures the sick, strengthens the well, and raises the dead. Nothing like it ever before discovered. With a bottle in every house sickness disappears as if by magic, and the next generation a race of giants. Look at me. Assure you, I only took half a bottle and had to stop. Had been in the last gasps of consumption, and got so strong and had so healthy an appetite, that I was afraid it would bankrupt the country. When I began to take it, couldn't cast a shadow; and now I can throw a dozen. Take a glass factory, a paper mill and three railroads

to supply the demand when its merits once get known—and all of it might be manufactured at Hard Luck."

"Fu'st rate scheme that; only, ther ain't no one ever gits time ter be sick hyer. Three whiffs ov Hard Luck air would cure ther wu'st case ov consumption; an' a dozen makes a man live forever, unless he gits cut off by ther lead sickness, or ther steel epperdemic. Don't want ter discourage yer, but ther truth must be told."

"Then, how would this strike you? Here's a string, and now I take it and throw it this way and that. Here's a loop, and there's a loop; and one of them catches, and one of them don't. Any sum from a dollar to five hundred that you can't guess which one catches. It's an even game, and the man with the luck takes the money. Why, with such a game as that running at Hard Luck, the people would be coming from far and near. Not that I would be making anything; but just think what a harvest for the hotel-keepers and saloons."

While he spoke he absently dropped the point of a pencil into one of the loops he had made on his knee, with a bit of string. With the other hand he drew the ends of the string, until the loop, narrowing, caught the pencil tightly, so that he had to raise it, and loosen the noose, to get the two apart.

"Guess the people of this district have seen the string game before this, and won't run very far to get a chance to buck against it. That's one ov ther things which ther more money yer puts down, ther less you'll take up: Hev ter hev suthin' beftier than that ter 'liven up Hard Luck."

"That's just a sample. Suppose we open out the royal game of faro, with all its variations, and have no limit to the depth the tiger can scratch, or be scratched? Right out of hand I deal them, and when I have pulled fifty-two times, there are no more cards in the deck. A square game, without a flyer. Was there ever anything that would help a town to grow like that?"

The string had dropped away into the pocket of Calico Dick, and he was talking more earnestly than ever. He had ceased his curvettings and prancings, and if it had not been for his singular dress, might have been taken almost at his own valuation. His last hint appeared to strike every one as being the nearest approach to his profession of any that he had yet made, and awakened some enthusiasm.

"Now yer begins ter talk," remarked Long Pete. "Sport gits a good way at Hard Luck; an' ef it hez rocks behind it, we kin open our arms an' take in a heap ov it. When yer gits ready ter open that same game jest hang up ther bills, an' you kin hev a house full. Mebbe you feel like givin' us a sample sheet now. Posey kin loan yer a table, an' hyer's ernuf ter begin with. Ef you divide fair, it won't take long ter start a heap ov industry in this hyer burg, an' we'll fetch in ther outsiders jest ez soon ez our own pockets are full. Swarms ov 'em!"

"That is not precisely what I meant. Bring in the outsiders first, and then there will be the more to divide. Besides, it is too late to-night for a real good, tearing down sort of a time. I was going to add, if the scheme for a bank suits, how would it do to mention one that's a little better? What's the matter with draw poker, the wild horse against the field? I don't altogether like its looks; but it will do in a small way to begin with; and I'll be ready for the big guns later on."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. WALLACE, OF THE TRAVELER'S HOME.

WHILE the conversation between the judge and Calico Dick was going on, Hiram Hurd had dropped quietly out of the room. Ewing had not noticed him going, and it was only when he looked around on parting with the stranger that he saw he was no longer present.

"Humph! That was an oversight. I should have put one of the boys on his trail, to keep him in sight, before I drifted off into any side issues. But that circus clown upset me a good deal more than he should have done at my time of life. Who is he? There was something about his eye that told me he was not the mountebank his dress and manner would indicate; and he may well be the sort of a fellow who needs looking at, and after. Long Pete took the hint, and will turn him inside out if it is to be done; but I wanted Pete for the other business. Perhaps he will be along in time, anyhow. The other boys will see the sign up and will be getting toward headquarters. It will be best to meet them as soon as possible. There is no telling how soon I shall have to call on them to act. Ah, there is one of them now. He may as well strike in after Hiram, until he runs him to a hole, and then come on to let us know."

The fellow was sauntering lazily along, paying no attention to any one so far as looks went; but at a signal, covertly given, he turned his steps so that he was soon by the side of the judge.

There was barely time to whisper a few words of instruction, and then the two fell apart, and went on their different ways; but within the next ten minutes the man had Hiram Hurd in sight.

"That much provided for," mentally remarked the judge, as he turned his steps toward the Alhambra, another saloon which was occasionally cheered by the light of his countenance.

"It is time that Kale was getting in with his report. If there has been no hitch in the proceedings—and it is hard to see why or how the thing could go wrong—the heavy work will be finished up in a lump; and the rest ought to be plain sailing. Ah!"

His soliloquy came to a sudden close. He was being addressed by a lady, and the lady was on horseback.

In all Hard Luck there was not a man with a more responsible and respectable appearance than Harold Ewing. As the light from the open doors of a neighboring saloon drifted out on him he made a figure that would attract confidence at once; and a stranger in the town would go no further in search of one from whom to obtain information. Other persons had addressed him in the same way, and it was not that which made him give the almost imperceptible start, and then look past the questioner at the figure beyond.

"Good-evening, sir. Can you direct me to a man by the name of Hiram Hurd? I have business with him."

It was Magdalena speaking, and of her the judge had never before heard; but instinct told him a great deal; and the diminutive figure beyond, drooping over her tired horse's shoulder, told him something more.

"A few moments ago he was at the Spotted Elk, a saloon not far away. He left before I did, however; and it may be hard to find him without a search over town. He seldom stays long in one place, but takes them all in, during the course of the evening."

The judge told a straightforward story, on the exact line of truth. It did better than anything else; and there was no telling who might overhear the conversation.

"Could you give me an idea of where he would most likely be found, and direct me to the place? I do not wish to waste time, since it is important that I see him at once. My little friend has had a long ride to-day and is in need of the rest which I cannot take until I find Mr. Hurd."

"It is not likely that he will be in his shanty for an hour or two, so that it is hardly worth while to try that for the present. The Alhambra, over yonder, is as likely a place as any, and it will be a pleasure for me to look in and see if he is there. If not I would advise you to take up your quarters at the hotel, and allow the search to continue itself, which it will do without any effort on your part, when it has once started. All that is necessary is for me to mention at the Alhambra, that a lady is at the hotel, who wishes to see Mr. Hurd, and the news will spread of its own weight, and it will not be long in reaching him."

Very true all that was, provided the judge was as good as his word, and Magdalena only hesitated a moment. She looked back over her shoulder, and saw the drooping form of little Faith, and felt that it would be cruel to keep her longer in the saddle.

"Thank you, very much. I am a stranger here, and perhaps I had best do as you suggest. I will wait until you have inquired at the saloon you mention, and if he is not there will go to the hotel, if you will kindly direct me there. With my companion in comfort I can continue the search myself. It will be enough if Hiram Hurd sees her. She can tell him what is necessary if he comes in my absence. Please make haste."

"A moment, then. Remain here, and I will speedily return."

The judge stepped nimbly away; nor was he gone long. When he returned a young man was with him.

"Not there; but may come in later on. This young man will show you the way to the Traveler's Home. Just follow, and it will save all trouble of asking. No thanking if you please. With us at Hard Luck it is always a pleasure to serve a lady. No doubt Hiram will be with you before many minutes have passed."

The judge turned one way; the young man turned another, walking steadily, with Magdalena and her little friend following not far in the rear.

It was quite a distance, comparatively speaking, to the Traveler's Home, and Magdalena was glad enough when she reached it. Her guide went in hastily, and was out again, followed by a rather buxom-looking woman, before she had fairly halted.

"Mrs. Wallace, who runs the shebang," said the young man, as he helped Magdalena to alight. "If she don't make you feel at home nobody else can. Hope Hiram will turn up soon. Good-night. I'll look after the horses."

He led the animals away as Mrs. Wallace grasped the hand of her elder guest; and then picked up Faith and carried her inside of the house, Magdalena following closely.

The home was a snug, well kept little establishment, the appearance of which was enough to revive the tired girl. With the landlady fluttering over them, with the softest of voices, and the gentlest of hands, they were truly thankful

for the good luck that had brought them thither. When she forced a little wine upon them, and insisted that she should and would have supper ready for them in ten minutes, and that meantime they should lie down and rest themselves, they were willing to obey. The strangest thing was that Mrs. Wallace made no preparation for the promised supper; and that long enough before the expiration of ten minutes they were both sleeping so soundly that a cannon would not have wakened them.

Meantime, the judge was not making any open effort to find Hiram Hurd, and if he had met him it is more than likely he would not have thought of directing him to the Traveler's Home. He shrugged his shoulders as he parted from Magdalena, and if his thoughts could have been heard they would have run something like this:

"There never was a trouble since the world began that a woman was not at the bottom of it; and I know Kale Canyon's story as well as though he had been here to tell it to me. In some way or other this interesting young female has got at more of the story than it is healthy to have flying around loose, and she has dragged the young one away with her, so that they can come and warn Hiram of what is in the wind. I hope they heard no names. Kale certainly ought to be here in the course of the evening; and until he comes I hardly know what more to do. The madame will take charge of them for the present."

It was a good guess that the judge had made; and it put him on his guard, even more than the appearance of Calico Dick had done. If the latter was a detective, as he more than half suspected, his coming to Hard Luck at this time was unfortunate, to say the least; and would not have been warmly greeted at any time. So long as his errand was unknown it was fair to suppose that it was after no small game; and Harold Ewing had his own reasons for knowing that he might furnish an acceptable quarry.

While he was considering the matter the agent he had set on the trail of Hurd came wandering along, and gave the sign that he had something to report.

As usual it did not take long for the two to meet and separate; but in that time he had posted the judge as to the whereabouts of the man he had been sent to find.

"Got him holed, an' Dandy on ther watch. Nibsey's old shanty. Been there ten minutes. What in thunder does he want there? What's the order?"

"Hold on to your man for half an hour. Then leave Dandy to keep him covered, and report to me at the Alhambra—or Long Pete if I am not there. He will tell you what to do next. That is all."

This time the judge went into the Alhambra to stay; and he had hardly entered when Long Pete followed, accompanied by Calico Dick of Rakestraw.

CHAPTER X.

PISTOLS ALL AROUND.

"LATER on ain't the time ter look fur ther big guns," was Long Pete's reply to the challenge of the Wild Horse from Rakestraw.

Pete was known as a chief at cards, and it was not often that he threw a chance at a stranger over his shoulder. If he did it this evening it was because he had a reason for it.

"If that is so, and they are not to be found here, suppose we go out and hunt them," was the careless rejoinder. "I thought maybe I could wake up a game, that would be as full of interest as profit, but somehow it won't work. Medicine not just right. With half the effort I can generally raise three fights and a game. The Horse from Rakestraw is wild no longer; he is only anxious. If he don't make expenses the first night where will he come out at when the campaign is closed. Take me by the hand, stranger; and lead me where the grass is a little longer for the packing, and there's a chance for a little grain by reaching through the fence."

His face took on more than ever a lugubrious look, and he spoke with a whine. If Pete had given a chance it is likely that half a dozen of the spectators would have been willing to sit on the other side of the table while they endeavored to find out what he was made of.

"A fair hit, that, Calico, when you called me stranger. I don't carry but one kind of card, and that don't have my name on; but I might have mentioned that you were talking to Pete Haverly, otherwise Long Pete, if I had thought you would care to know. You won't find a better spot than Posey's for an all around sort of a time of it, and if I had the time I would sit down with you till some ov ther rest ov ther boys was drawn on. But I hev ter meet a man, an' it's gettin' nigh to ther hour fur goin', so that it ain't worth while ter begin. If it will do you any good I'll see yer later ez fur ez my pile goes; er you kin go along. It won't take a great while, an' you'll hev a chance ter see what ther town looks like. It's really a brisk little burg by candlelight."

"Hits me to a T. Propell and you will find yours truly alongside of you, every time." This was the way it came that the Wild Horse

from Rakestraw made his appearance at the Alhambra, just at the time that the judge had a few leisure moments on hand.

The Alhambra was a totally different sort of place from the Spotted Elk. A few men like Harold Ewing had the *entree* of both; but as a rule the two sets of patrons did not mix; and the Elk was a great deal better suited in its style to a man who put on the kind of frills that were worn by Calico Dick.

Pete Haverly knew this well enough; but he had a curiosity to see how the stranger would act. He certainly ought to be able to learn something in this way; and as yet he had not been able to come to any conclusion as to what the Wild Horse really was. He might be a card sharp; and again he might be a detective in disguise. If the latter he would be apt to modify his style according to his position, and in any event he would have the satisfaction of creating something of a sensation.

"A heap of style here," was Calico Dick's half whispered comment, as they entered.

"Must be slow accordingly, and need the biggest kind of a waking up. If you don't find anything in your hand to follow my lead make no worry over it, but bunch your cards, and watch how the game will run. I never see a crowd like this but it sets me wild to have a little fun. If you have the sand, play I'm your brother, just dropped in on Hard Luck to see the sights. I swear I won't disgrace the family record."

And before Pete could raise an objection Calico Dick had dashed away from him, and taken a place at the bar.

"If you please, a little whisky and water this way. Would like to take it to a shady nook, where I could drink it without every hungry looker-on seeing me do it. In Hard Luck every man seems to be born dry; and the whole population sitting around, waiting for a treat. I came here to do them good, but they don't seem to have the pluck of a mouse, and if there is neither fun nor profit the Wild Horse from Rakestraw will amble off for greener pastures in the morning."

His manner was not so boisterous, but it was even more offensive than when he entered the Spotted Elk, and Long Pete was puzzled.

"Blamed ef I don't begin ter think he's just what he seems, a nat'ral born fool. If he was huntin' one man he would be trying ter get him, without stirrin' up the hull town. Ef he had anything in fur Posey Peebles he wouldn't be rubbin' Matt Hardy the wrong way of the grain. Unless the bluff works better than sich things jin'rally do, there will be a heap of fun here in half a minnit. If the boss wants him out of the way all he has to do is to let him alone, an' he'll git there of himself. Wish he'd take him in tow an' leave me out. I got enough."

As though in answer to the thought, Matt Hardy made his appearance. He was a little-big man, and in his manner soft as silk, so that the stranger who persisted in tramping on his toes was apt to get a surprise.

He tapped Calico Dick gently on the shoulder. "The gentlemen of whom you are speaking are patrons of mine, with no particular desire to tear things apart in the Alhambra, but if they get to going I can't answer for them. The cheapest plan for me to follow is to see that they are not started. We are not yearning for visitors of your stripe, but the money of one man is as good as that of another as long as he behaves himself. You can take your whisky and water to one corner if you want to, but please keep your remarks to yourself. And I never caution a man but once. Then, if he keeps it up, out he goes."

The conclusion was spoken sternly enough to make almost any man think twice before he spoke again. The Wild Horse drew back with a look of deep surprise, as he looked Hardy all over.

"Well, I'll be hanged. There seems to be two gentlemen in town—and I'm one of them. Wonder how you stand it to live off such a crowd. I couldn't. Make the provision large enough for two; and let's go together by ourselves, and enjoy it. I'm Calico Dick, the Wild Horse from Rakestraw; and if you'll listen to me talk I can give you points enough to be worth a million. Fact is, I've made my pile, and I am looking around for poor but deserving individuals and communities. I give them points, if necessary loan them a starter; and then just lay back and enjoy seeing them rake in the millions. If you are in need, say the word and here is what will see you over the ripple."

Once more Calico Dick produced his wallet, leaning over toward Hardy in a confidential sort of way.

"What in thunder are you talking about?" asked Hardy. The manner of the man somewhat puzzled him. Was he making game of him, or was he a crank, who meant all that he said, whether he could perform it or not?

"There seems to be a good deal of wealth there, but it won't be there long if you flourish it about like that. Some of the boys will jump you the first chance. I suppose it is bound to come sooner or later, and it's hardly worth while to be giving you advice; but if you know what is good for you, you'll make a bee-line for

your stopping place, without waiting for that whisky and water: and you'll stay there till you can put the butt-end of that wealth in a place of safety; or else take the first stage that goes out of town. But I don't want any more shouting here. It's offering a premium for robbery, and though you deserve to lose the boodle, it would give the house a bad name if the trick was taken under this roof.

The Wild Horse gave a snort, such as he had not yet given at the Alhambra. It sounded like the sure enough thing, and attracted the attention of every disengaged man there who was not already listening to the conversation.

"Whoughe! And down here in Hard Luck they add insult to injury. Here have I been waiting for ten minutes, money in hand, for them to set out the genuine juice of the corn, and they haven't even offered me a smell of the water jug. And now they want to run my own affairs, and appoint a guardian. What sort of a town is Hard Luck, anyhow? There's no fun nor whisky; and if you knocked a man down here, he would say, thank you, and ask you to rub his head. For want of sand it takes the cake. I can't stand it any longer, and I'm going to bed. Clear the track and the Wild Horse glides down the home stretch, and under the wire, way ahead. Whoughe! Listen to his yells!"

"He has it now," thought the judge, who had been watching the proceedings with interest. "The fellow is only a fool, after all, and Matt is going for him."

The last snort of the Wild Horse, accompanied by a loud rattle of his heels on the floor, was too much for the proprietor. With a sudden spring he launched himself at the objectionable visitor, and had him by the collar and thigh before there was time to suspect what was coming.

"Clear the way!" shouted Hardy, as he tightened his grip. And as that part of the line of spectators nearest to the door opened, he started with his prisoner.

At first it looked as though there was going to be no trouble about running him out. Through much experience Matt had become an expert, and when he once fairly froze to a man, his hold was seldom broken until the unfortunate individual was landed outside of the door with more or less of his bones broken.

Calico Dick was in a fair way to go like the rest. At least, so it seemed. Matt's hands were on him, while his were clawing the air after an aimless fashion.

Then, how it all happened no one could tell; but Matt's grip was broken, while Calico Dick had caught his shoulder and thigh and raised him bodily in the air.

"Whoughe! Here we come; the boss of the Alhambra, mounted on his untamed, fiery charger, the Wild Horse from Rakestraw. Clear the track and you'll see the quickest time on record. Speech from the honorable gentleman, who takes the stand."

And with a dexterous twitch and turn Calico Dick threw Hardy fairly upon the bar.

It was the first time that anything of the kind had ever happened in the house. Although attempts to turn the tables had been made a number of times, Matt had always held his own. Though he generally kept his temper pretty well, this time he lost it altogether. Scarcely had he touched the bar when he bounded back to the floor, a revolver appearing in his hand, as he glared in front of him, looking for the man from Rakestraw.

The Wild Horse was not there, however. As Matt left his arms he sprung to one side, and into the midst of a little knot of men who were watching the proceedings with evident delight.

As when a strange dog, with a kettle appended to his latter end, runs into a crowd, every one is anxious to give him a kick, so it seemed that on the instant every one was reaching for the man from Rakestraw. By the time that Matt had recovered his wits they were all at it, tooth and nail; and the stranger was holding his own, and perhaps a little more, in spite of the odds.

Then revolvers cracked, and amidst a cry from some man's lips that Judge Ewing was shot, the lights went out, and the room was involved in darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

ROUGH ON THE JUDGE.

THE turning out of the lights was a simple affair, since they were arranged with reference to doing that very thing on emergency. The resort to firearms at the Alhambra was one of the forbidden things; and that was the easiest way to stop it. At all events there was no more shooting after that, and when the lamps were lit again, as they speedily were, it was found that no great damage had been done, outside of what had happened to the judge; and how great that was it took a little investigation to discover.

At first sight the supposition was that he was dead. He lay stretched upon the floor, without sense or motion; and there was a smutch of blood on his forehead that produced the impression in the minds of the spectators that he had been instantly killed. As coroners'

juries were not in vogue at Hard Luck, four men raised him up to place him in a more suitable position; and it was then discovered that he was not dead, and that it was more than likely he was not dying.

"Pretty close call," said one, as he lightly followed the course of the bullet along Harold Ewing's skull. "If it had hit a trifle deeper it would have been the end of him; but the way it looks I reckon he's only creased. Who fired the shot?"

"Better ask who didn't. Every blamed fool in the house seemed to take the chance to let off his gun. Where's that galoot from Rakestraw who began the racket? It was his infernal side that started the whole trouble?"

It was easier to ask questions than to answer them. No one remembered to have seen a weapon in the hand of Calico Dick; and it was in vain that they looked around for him. He had vanished.

Matt Hardy regained his coolness when the lights went out. In the darkness he strode toward the spot where the stranger had just stood; but when the lamps were lit, after a little, and it was discovered that the Wild Horse had made good his disappearance, he turned quietly away, and busied himself about the judge. He was something of an amateur surgeon, and had the wounded man carried to his own room, from which he could shut out the greater part of the crowd. Then he examined the wound carefully, coming to the same conclusion that the party who had first looked at him had done, so far as the result of the shot was concerned. He had a little different idea about the whole matter, however.

"Pretty hard hit—was the lead sent to kill? or did it do the work it was intended for? It's dollars to dimes that that fellow in the calico coat took the trick, or raised the racket while one of his friends held straight. I guess Ewing will come around all right; but it will take some time, and he won't get out of here tonight. The next time I try to bounce a wild man from the woods, who comes in here and politely asks to be kicked out, you bet I begin the work by knocking him endways. He may not be as big a fool as he looks. I'll swear Calico Dick was not."

There was one of the outsiders who felt more than an ordinary interest in the condition of the judge. He had been barred out along with the majority of the crowd, but he lingered around, uneasily watching the door, and waiting for some definite news. He did not join in the outcry that was made by the more excitable ones, nor did he talk of starting off to hunt up the stranger who was more or less responsible. Long Pete was a practical man, and held to the business in hand. He had come there for orders, and saw at once how this accident was going to interfere with the work that he had understood was on hand for the night.

As time passed on he grew more and more uneasy, and when Matt Hardy came out alone he managed to edge up close enough to hear his report, given to a number of anxious inquirers.

"Not dead yet; and I guess he's not going to die. Hard to tell though, till there's a change one way or the other. It may be an hour or so before he comes around. When he does I'll let you know. Has anybody gone for Doc Shorter? It strikes me that there can't much be done, but he must have every chance, and I don't want to be doing the wrong thing either."

"Hasn't said anything, yet?" asked Pete.

"Said anything? Bless your soul, it's an even thing of it if he's drawn a breath. I'm not expecting him to be shouting for some time yet. When he does you will hear of it; but it's not worth while to try to wake him up with a noise out here. You boys keep a little quieter, or I'll come out and rid the house."

And so saying Matt took a tumbler of water from the bar and went back to his patient.

Pete turned away despondently.

"That knocks things higher than the monument. Some ov ther boys'll be here fur orders afore long, an' ef I could only git a word out ov him I'd know what ter say. Best thing are ter tell 'em ter git an eye on this Calico Dick, an' keep it there tell funder orders, an' I'll hang 'round ter know ther moment he gits his eyes open. There comes one of 'em now."

Pete had not made up his mind too soon. As he looked through the door he recognized a familiar face, and at once strolled out.

"He's thar yit," was the hurried salutation of the man as he was joined by Haverly. "I told Dandy he might as well make a hole in him if he came out afore I got back. That's what it looks like it was going ter be, anyhow. Is ther boss in thar, er hev you ther orders? He said you would have ther say-so ef he warn't around."

"Dandy hed better hold on, an' so hed you. If things ain't done just ez the boss wants there's apt ter be trouble; an' he ain't explainin' right now. Can't find out whether he's drilled through ther head, er on top ov his head; but he dropped anyhow; an' it ain't likely that he'll hev much ter say in time fur ther work ter-night. I'll wait an' see ef he's goin' ter come 'round; if he ain't I'll see ther lieutenant. You better go back ter Dandy an' tell him ter keep on at what

he's doin', and do nothin' else, tell we're heard from. Then you go hunt up ther man from Rakestraw. Ef he hed told me ter down him instead ov watch him, it would hev come out a heap sight better."

"An' who in blazes are ther man from Rakestraw? An' ef I get him, what am I to do with him?"

In a few words Pete explained what had happened that evening; and suggested that it would not be apt to cause much weeping if anything was to happen to the stranger, even though it was not certain who he might be, or that it was his hand that fired the shot which brought the judge down.

Then the man went away, and Pete resumed his watch and wait.

After a little a man came out from the room.

"He's coming around all right, I guess. Begins to breathe natural, and has opened his eyes. Matt says he will be sitting up in a few minutes."

The announcement was received with interest by those who had not gone back to their cards; and even some of the gamblers raised their eyes from the tables to learn what it was that was exciting the enthusiasm of the crowd.

"Glad to hear it," said one. "He is too good a man to go out of the wet in that way."

"P'raps he'll be able to tell who come so near puttin' out ther light fur him. An' then—it's like ez not we'll have a neck-tie party ez will jest raise ther dead."

Such remarks as these were flying around the room, and there seemed to be a general impression that the judge would make his appearance in a few moments. In the other room something which puzzled Matt Hardy, and quite bewildered his assistants, was taking place.

The messenger dispatched in search of Dr. Shorter had failed to find him; and Matt had continued in charge of the case.

There did not seem to be any fracture of the skull, deeply though the bullet had creased it, and the hemorrhage amounted to nothing; but the comatose condition continued for so long a time that Hardy began to think that it might last until death supervened. It takes nerve to do nothing at all in such cases, and though Matt Hardy was careless enough of risks where his own fate was concerned, he was afraid to let his patient alone. He chafed his hands, sprinkled his face with water, and tried from time to time to get a few drops of whisky down his throat.

After a long while the efforts to resuscitate the insensible man appeared to be meeting with success. Gradually the color began to come back to his face, there was some movement of his lips, and he took a long inspiration, after which his breathing seemed to be almost natural.

"It's all right, now! He will be up on his feet before you know it, looking around for the man that slung that lead. I've seen such a case before, though it wasn't quite as bad. Fall back and give him more air. If a couple of you would go out, and tell the boys that he is coming through all right, it would leave more room here and be all the better for him."

Sure enough. In the course of a few minutes the judge moved his hands, opened his eyes, and tried to raise himself.

"Hold on a moment, judge. You are all right now, but give yourself plenty of time. Had a little accident, you understand, but there are no bones broken, and you will be fit to dance at a wedding before the evening is over. But rest yourself a little longer now."

As Matt spoke he pressed the judge gently back with his hand.

Ewing ceased the effort to rise, but he looked up wonderingly at the speaker, and then at the other faces that were near.

"Hello! How's this? Where am I? and who are you? I don't remember to have ever seen your face before, and this is a queer sort of a hole you have me in, anyway. See here, I don't half like the looks of things. You seem all right, but those others look as though they would cut a throat for a quarter. Stand a little back, if you please, till I understand how things are."

Certainly the judge was strong enough now. He raised up without the least semblance of weakness, and clapped his hand to his breast.

An instant later an angry look came over his face:

"You infernal scoundrels! You have robbed me, have you? and now want to brazen the thing out. Where is my pocketbook? If it don't turn up mighty sudden, there will be some trouble in this camp. You understand me?"

"Steady, Ewing, shake yourself together. A stray bullet creased you, and for awhile we thought you were booked for over the range, but you will be all straight in a minute more, if you keep your head cool. I guess your pocketbook will turn up where you kept it, for we are all friends here, and have been working over you for the last hour. Never a sign of a wallet did I see, and I carried you in here from the spot where you fell. Don't you remember? I was having a little flare around with that stranger who called himself the Wild Horse from Rakestraw, and got the worst of it. Then everybody began to shoot as the light went out, and you got chipped in the flurry. But it was

only bark-deep, and glad am I to see you up once more."

"That's all part of the job, is it? What do you mean by that nonsense about the Wild Horse, and all that? I only know I started out this evening with twenty thousand dollars in my pocket, and it's not there now. If you picked me up after the trick was done, and know no more about it, I am much obliged for your trouble. But who are you? I don't know you from a side of sole-leather; and as far as I know never saw you before in my life."

"Boys," said Hardy, stepping back a pace, a look of trouble and dismay on his countenance, "it's rough on the judge, but we must have brought him through too soon. He's as crazy as a bed-bug."

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE LUM FINDS HIRAM.

Of course it is easy to understand that, by his guide, the judge had sent orders to Mrs. Wallace to see that Magdalena and her companion were not to be permitted to leave her house until she heard from him again.

He gave no more explicit orders, but he knew well enough that Magdalena would be drugged and confined, to make matters sure. It was the safest way to dispose of the matter for the present, especially since he did not care to proceed to any extreme measures until he knew more of the Wild Horse from Rakestraw, and had finished putting matters in train in regard to Hiram Hurd. Even if their friends had found them it would have been hard work for the two to have proved that they had been treated with anything but kindness. It was but natural that they should be exhausted after their long journey; and exhausted nature will account for a great deal.

There was one individual, small but important, who had been watching what was going on with much interest; and had even managed to hear what had been said by Mrs. Wallace to the girls. Little Lum had his own ideas of strategy, and had thought it best not to be seen entering Hard Luck with the others. He had halted outside for a little, and then leaving his horse picketed, strolled on in their wake. He was watching when they spoke to Ewing, and was by no means satisfied when he saw the trouble that gentleman took to serve the two on whom he had apparently never before laid eyes. Lum had promised to undertake an individual search for Hiram Hurd; but it seemed to him that it could wait. The father was in no more danger than the daughter, judging from the efforts of Kale Canyon; and ought to be better able to take care of himself. He followed to the Traveler's Home, watched, waited, and peered into the little room where the girls were sleeping, through a convenient window.

"Looks suspicious like, an' dunno but what I'd better stay here, kinder on guard, tell I kin see what they are goin' ter try. Then ag'in, ef they're sharp they won't make a move tell they find out what all she hez bin sayin' sence she come ter town. Hiram may hev heard ov her, an' be startin' out on the war-path, all paint an' feathers. Ther' ort ter be a hour er so thet she'll be ez safe thar ez arywhar else in town. In a hour I could do a heap ov lookin' fur Hurd, the deacon; an' mebbe bring him on the carpet with banners a-flyin'. I'll reesk it, aryhow."

But somehow, the search for Hiram Hurd did not turn out to be a simple affair. The boy had learned wisdom from what had befallen the girl and was slow to ask questions lest he might stumble on another of Hiram's enemies. His first move was for the post-office.

He knew something of the ins and outs of the town from having been in it for a short time, once before; but he had no idea of how the people might be banded together, or of who could be trusted, and who not. The public institution was located in Bill Allen's grocery, and thitherward he turned his eyes.

Allen appeared to be an honest individual as times went, and there were such evidences of prosperity about his establishment that Lum thought it was not likely he would be engaged in anything crooked. After a survey he went to work cautiously, inquiring if Hurd had been there lately; and hearing that he had not, asked where he would be likely to find him.

Allen smiled and answered good-naturedly in much the same way that the judge had responded to Magdalena. Hurd was not an easy man to find after business hours. He might drop in during the course of the evening to get his mail; or he might send for it if he heard that the coach had arrived. Outside of that chance it was possible to find him at one of the saloons, or at his cabin. Yielding still further to the questioning, Allen described the location of the latter, and then grew tired.

Lum considered. A note might reach the man before he could. With a stubby pencil he scrawled a line.

"You'll find Faith at the Traveler's Home. Look out that some one don't turn your toes up, or hurt the girl."

He reasoned that he could not put the enemy more on guard if this came into their hands, or tell them anything that they did not already know. And if Hiram should get it, it would do

the work as well as a personal interview. Leaving that as a chance he started out in search of the cabin.

He found it without much trouble. It was a small building, but stoutly built, and Lum thought that if the owner was at home he could stand quite a siege. There was a faint glimmer of light through a crack in a shutter and the boy watched it as though it might tell him something.

It only lasted for an instant, and then disappeared. Lum waited, expecting that the occupant would come out. As the coming was delayed for some little time the boy was about to advance and knock when the door cautiously opened, and a man appeared, who started back on seeing some one right in front of him.

The start was not lost on Lum, who, however, stood his ground.

"Is that you, Mr. Hurd?" he asked. "I want to speak with you, and was just going to knock."

"That's all aight, sonny. Speak away. I am listening?"

Was it a trap? If it was Lum did not fall into it. The voice sounded all right, but there came a sudden doubt in the mind of the boy, whether this was Hiram, after all.

"There's a letter in the office for you, that you ought to have right away."

"Like as not, like as not. I'll see to that later on. Run on. Here's something for your trouble. Who sent you?"

"Thanks, but I'll wait till yer gits that letter, an' then mebbe you kin make it twice ez much. See? There's a heap more ter tell yer—after yer reads it."

"I have no time to fool away with small boys. If you have anything more to say, say it now," retorted the man, trying to move nearer.

"Guess not," answered Lum, with a light laugh, and darting away.

"I dunno what you war doin' in thar, an' I never see'd either ov yer afore, but I'm willin' ter bet rocks that you ain't him. So long, my frien'; when I see Hiram I'll tell him that some one's bin rootin' 'round in his ark-hives. Bet you he'll be hot; an' you'll be hotter."

"Which I ain't sure ov all that," he continued to himself as he hurried out of the way; "but it's jest ez well ter be on ther keerful side when there's a sign ov danger in ther air. Guess I better try ther s'loons, after all."

He heard the man again call to him to stop, but paid no attention to him. If it was Hiram Hurd, as he did not believe, he would probably go to the post-office, where the letter would tell him all. If it was not, the less he had to say to the party the better. It was a chance, then, that brought him to the Alhambra, and made him a witness to the fracas in which the judge received at least a temporary quietus.

He was sure then that he had plenty of time at his disposal, and was in no hurry to go away, since he might learn more of the judge, and it was possible that Hurd himself might come to learn, since the affair, doubtless, would soon be reported all over town.

Long Pete attracted his attention through the interest he manifested in the condition of the judge; and he kept so close to him that he managed to overhear part of the conversation between him and the shadow who came there to report. He dropped Peter upon that, and followed the other man; who led him to Nibsey's shanty, and the other shadow, who was watching it.

This time he could not get near enough to overhear what was said, but he could guess reasonably well, and waited until he saw that Dandy was left to his own devices.

"They're after, him sure, and if he hasn't dropped to it by this time some one ought to tell him. If he waits long enough ther jedge may give ther word ter drop him yet. If it kin be did I shell perceed ter arrove."

The proceeding did not offer much difficulty. He was more concerned over the possible reception in store for him, than afraid of not being able to elude the eyes of the watching Dandy. The building was one that could easily be watched by a single man, since there was no opening at all upon one side. Dandy had ensconced himself a comfortable distance so that he could see if any one left by the other three sides.

The view of the rear door was somewhat indistinct, and of that fact Lum decided to try and take advantage.

"A healthy ole father, an' a high ole miner would I make; but blame me ef I b'lieve he kin tell me frum Hiram Hurd at that distance, an' I'll try it accordin'."

Very cautiously did he creep up toward the shanty—which was not much worse as to looks, however, than the neighboring buildings. There was no light visible this time; but that fact told nothing. If he had been half a minute or so later he would have seen no light in the cabin of Hurd; and yet some one was there, and had been there for some time, all the same. Unless these men—who were willing to gamble on their ideas—were very much mistaken, Hiram Hurd was about.

So he crawled up with a caution that he had learned in his frontier experience. When he

had reached the door he waited a moment to see if there was any sign that he had been discovered by those on the outside or within. Satisfied that he was so far unobserved, he raised himself upright, and stood on his tip-toes in the doorway. Then he stepped down in the hesitating way of one who does not court observation, crouched, and slowly made his way around the corner of the house, until he was screened from the observation of the spy.

Once out of sight and he took to his heels with a suddenness in striking contrast with his snail-like progress before. By the time that Dandy had followed as far as the corner to make himself certain as to who it was that had come out of the house, the boy had gotten clear out of sight.

Dandy hesitated, looked back over his shoulder, and then to the front. Some one had gone away; and he suspected that it was the man he was placed there to watch. As Lum had expected, he followed in the hope of getting a view of the fugitive. By the time that he was a couple hundred yards away Lum had got back, and was rapping gently at the door.

No one answered, and the boy was in haste. He tried the door, and when he had lifted the latch it swung open.

"Can't do more than kick a feller out; an' guess while he's doin' ov it I kin be shoutin' ther news. Here goes in ther dark. Dandy may come back, an' I don't want him a ketchin' on."

He closed the door behind him, and stood waiting. As he did not at the first speak, it was natural that he should then be silent for a little to listen. He did not know what sort of a place he was in, though he believed it was considered to be a deserted house. He heard a confused sound, that scarcely reached his ear at the first; but which he knew was a voice speaking in a low tone, in what he believed was an adjoining room. The shanty might not be very large, but it was evidently divided.

"F I know anything, that's a female thet's talkin'. Praps it might be ez well ter git nearer, an' see who's at ther front. It's posserble thet I'm in ther wrong box, arter all."

Silently he crept across the room until he reached the partition by which it was divided, and listened.

It was a woman that was talking, sure enough; who spoke in unsteady, gasping whispers; and without hesitation Lum listened to the story that she told.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORY OF A WRECKED LIFE.

"TRUE, true," said the gasping voice of the female.

"All that you say is only too true; but listen to what I have to say, and learn some of the things that I have suffered. For every error—or sin, as you call it—see if I have not received a just recompense of reward. It is because there is no longer any hope for me—that the end cannot be far off—that I have sent for you, to hear at last what you should have known from the start, and what I would have been only too willing to have told you had it concerned myself alone."

A fit of low coughing interrupted the speaker. The sound was hollow, cavernous, and as the boy on the other side of the partition heard it, he thought that the lungs from whence it came could not be long for this world.

It seemed to strike the other listener in much the same way.

"Come, come. I ask no such sacrifice from you. I have said that the past was forgiven, and, as far as it could be, forgotten. I doubt if it would be advisable to attempt to do anything more for you to-night; but try to rest easy, and to-morrow I will see what can be done. You shall not be allowed to want, of that I can assure you; and there are better quarters than these. You may kill yourself if you go on."

"What of that?" answered the woman, wearily.

"It would only be the end I have been yearning for ever since I began to feel that way. I could not die until justice was done you, or perhaps I would not have been content to drag this miserable frame longer through life, or keep up the hopeless and unequal fight. I have a little yet—enough to last me the short time that I have to stay; and if I had not, I would die sooner than accept aid from you."

"It will not take long to say the words that will explain all. After I have said them it will make no difference if I die before adding the rest. Chester Coates was my brother."

An exclamation from the man caused her to pause in her speech, and take the opportunity to have another spell of coughing.

"Your brother! Of all the strange solutions that I have given to the riddle of the past, that is the one natural one that never crossed my mind. Had I known it, how different the past might have been!"

"Not so greatly different in fact, though it might have saved you some heart-ache—you have a heart, have you not?"

The question was asked in a dreamy sort of way, as though an idea that might never have occurred to her before.

"Heavens! To ask that, after all these years! What else have I had to moan over? A little hiding that was but child's play; a little gnawing pain because of the wound to my pride; a little fear for the future; a little dodging of strange men until I was sure that they would not say to me that I was wanted. That was all. From that to this there has not been a day that my pockets were not lined with all the gold I needed for present wants, with prospects for wealth in the near future. At times I have had even more than the shadow of affluence, and when bad luck came, as it sometimes did, the disaster was never overwhelming. No, my life—except so far as it is viewed from the standpoint of my heart—has not been altogether wrecked."

The revelation of the woman had worked more than a little change in the man. His voice was softer, and he seemed to be trying to console and perhaps deceive her.

"Yes, yes. I know. But what is all that to an exile? Let me go back; and try not to interrupt me. Indeed, it will be better so."

"Chester Coates had gone the wrong way long enough before you met me, though, unfortunately, I was almost the only person who knew it. A wicked man he was then, and a wicked man he is now; and yet he has sworn to me that it was not of his own choice he went into a course of anything more reprehensible than folly."

He had gambled a little, visited the race track, and been in a certain sort of way the companion of fast men and women; but he had supported his extravagance entirely out of his own money; and up to the time he made the break which involved you in his ruin, not a dollar of other people's money had ever stuck to his fingers. He had the money—twenty thousand dollars—in his breast pocket, intending to deposit it—and forgot that it was there; forgot his duty."

"Unfortunately, he had an appointment that very evening with certain men about whose record there was a hazy cloud, though nothing definite had ever been publicly said. Just what happened that evening he never told me; and perhaps he never completely knew. Enough to say that he lost his senses for a time; and when they returned the twenty thousand was gone."

"I am not defending him, mind you. Had he been strictly honest he would have told the truth about the matter though the heavens fell. He would have been ruined for the time being—perhaps imprisoned—but what of that? Instead of that he attempted to cover up his fault, and trust to luck to bring him out all right in the future."

"He was only too successful in hiding the matter until he had a chance to leave you in the lurch. How suspicion fell upon you is not hard to understand. A touch of the finger, a stroke of the pen, and he had counted into the safe twenty thousand dollars, which had never been there. And yet, at the time, I knew not what he had done, and for a long time mistook for misfortune the retribution that followed fast and hard."

"I need not say that he hated you. But for your coming he might have induced me to marry a man old enough to be my father; and rich enough to have been banker to Croesus. Why I did not do as he wanted is more than I can explain, anyhow. It would have made so little difference to me in the end."

"Or—I am not right there. It would have made a great deal of difference, but not in the way I thought then. We were only fated to live together a few months; and even then there was a dark cloud over my life. I would have been happier with old Pierre Robidoux. And there would not have been the years of wandering, and the oceans of sorrow that lay between that time and this."

"But had I known it there should have been neither. When you sent Faith to me, why did you not come yourself? Why did you lead me to believe that you were dead? How could you part forever from your child?"

During the little time that had elapsed since Lum became a listener, he could note a change in the tone of Hiram Hurd. More and more he pitied the woman who seemed so near death's door.

"How could I know that the so-called fugitive from justice was living in more prosperity than I have ever known since the hour when I stole away from your home? How could I know that my brother had lied to me, and the so-called proofs he used to blind my eyes, and stifle the little conscience I had, were all made by him? When I found out, it was too late."

"Why did I send Faith? Because I loved her too much to drag her from pillar to post in the wake of my unhappy brother and myself. I thought you would heed a message that appeared to come from the dead, and that the innocence of her young life would be the better secured by placing her in your hands. Edward Ammersly, how have you fulfilled that trust? Give me news of my daughter, before I die."

There was a wail in the woman's tones that had never been there when speaking of herself; and she waited for his answer with breathless eagerness.

"Before Heaven, I have done my duty by her as well as I knew how. I have kept her apart from the nomadic life that I have lived; and to judge from her letters she is growing up into a tender and true girl, who has not lost all love for the father of whom she has seen so little. If you live you shall see her."

"If I live? Do you think the end is so very near?"

"Forgive me. I did not intend to alarm you. When I found you here to-night I thought the end had come already. You lay like a corpse, and there seemed no movement of your breast. Had it not been for the suspicion of color in one cheek, I could have sworn that you had passed away while waiting for me. You have grown stronger since then. Perhaps I saw you at the very worst, and reaction that will be lasting may have set in. Who knows?"

"And you hope not? No blame to you if it be so. I have deserved nothing else, and have found more than I hoped for. And yet—it would be a pleasure, the pleasure of my life, to see her once more, as she is, before I die. Not for her to know! I would not have her recognize her mother in the wreck that is before you now. And—I had forgotten. There was a reason why I asked you to meet me here. It was more than a mere explanation of the past that I intended to give. I have reason to believe that your life is in danger; and not only yours, but that of Faith. Be careful of yourself; but, most of all, be careful of her."

"Part of that is news to me. My own life has always been in danger since I came to this Western country, and mingled with the desperate class to be found here. When one keeps out in the first flight he is where might makes right; and there is little law save that which is enforced by the revolver. But what harm can come to little Faith? She is far enough from here, and not a soul here could trace any connection between the miner, Hiram Hurd, and the little school-girl in the far-away city. I can protect myself, and you need have no fears for Faith."

"She may not be as far away as you think; or she may be much further, since I know that she has been found, and that a plot has been laid against her life, by one to whose interest it is that she should die. Be warned. If it is necessary to secure her safety, give up everything here at once and take her away where she cannot be reached."

"But this must be an illusion of your overwrought brain. What reason could any one have for harming the child? If it was myself, alone, that was in danger, I could understand."

"There are plenty here who could profit by your death; and there is one here to whom the death of Faith would mean much, since he believes that I am dead. With you and she out of the way the road would be opened to the wealth that belongs to me at present."

Of course Little Lum could not see the face of the man; but he could imagine its expression as he heard this announcement. The wealth she spoke of could not be very extensive when its owner was dying in Nibsey's old shanty. Probably the mind of the woman had begun to wander.

There was something of this expressed in the words of the man by which he tried to soothe the sick woman.

She understood what he thought.

"I am neither raving nor wandering. It is true that for the last six months I have been sought for. The will of an uncle—who knew Chester for what he was, but was uncertain as to me—makes me his heir; and his fortune was no small one. Chester believes me dead—thinks that I died some two months ago. If my child was gone he would be my heir so long as my husband did not appear to claim his courtesy. He knows that I never freed myself from the old tie, nor has he been able to find a record of your having done anything to secure a divorce. In the absence of certainty he will make himself sure. That wealth must go to Faith. I doubted whether you were the man I could trust; or whether you would be willing that she should take this fortune as coming from me. I have those doubts no longer. I have prepared for it though. Here is my will. It is duly signed and witnessed; and a copy of it is also in the hands of my lawyer. It is written in duplicate, and if one fails the other will hold good. Take it, with the other papers; and you can learn all that I have not told you. I can talk no more to-night. Do not think of me. Mary will take care of me, and if a change for the worse should come I will send for you. I know it is a miserable place, but I deserve no better; and am satisfied that I have a roof over my head at all. Good-night."

Husky though her voice might be there was no mistaking the firmness with which she spoke, and Lum knew that the interview must be about at an end, and that very soon Hurd would take his departure. He began to think what he had better do with himself. It might not be a comfortable affair to be found there, in a position where he could have overheard such a confidential discourse. Hiram might strike before he heard him.

Crouching there in the darkness the boy took time to think how his line of retreat lay. He

was not sure now how he had crossed the room. A door might be opened any second, and a flood of light thrown into the room. He did not want to be caught fumbling around for a way out. While he hesitated he was made aware of the fact that it was too late for retreat. A door did open, quite near to him; though the room he was in grew but little lighter. Hiram Hurd was passing out, and looking neither to the right nor the left. Lum crouched lower, and waited. He had found his man; but did not care to speak to him there. He thought he would follow him as closely as he dared, and speak to him of Faith so soon as there was no danger of suspicion.

Hurd was in thought, or he would not have passed out so carelessly. Lum listened to hear him close the door and step away. Instead there came to his ears the sound of a coarse oath, in a coarser tone of voice, followed by the words:

"Ye'r thar are ye? Jump my lay-out, eh? Take it!"

Then there was a blow; and the noise made by the fall of a man.

CHAPTER XIV.

HIRAM GETS SOME MORE SHOCKS.

LUM was almost prepared to have something happen, so that he was not taken by surprise. There was an affray that would give him a chance to escape, at any rate; and it might be that he would take a hand in it himself. He felt committed to Hiram Hurd's interests; and did not intend to see him murdered if he could help it. He suspected that this was the man who had been on watch; though in that he was mistaken.

Nibsey's shanty had been deserted for some time because its owner had disappeared. There had been some sort of a mortgage on it, and the proprietorship had apparently passed to Bill Allen; but Nibsey was back now with just enough "benzene" on board to be ugly, and was determined to assert all the rights that he had, and a good many more to boot. That was the reason why he attacked Hiram Hurd on sight, and had him down before he knew that there was danger at hand.

He was viciously inclined to follow up his success, and had raised the club in his hand for another blow when Lum came shooting out from the house, like a rock from a catapult, landing his head squarely in Nibsey's stomach, and causing him to stagger back half a dozen yards, though he did not actually fall.

By the time that he had gathered himself up for an attack, Lum was not to be seen. The boy was wise enough not to try fistic conclusions with a man of whom he knew nothing save the sound of his voice, and had slipped out of the way; though he had no notion of beating a retreat until he saw that Hurd could do for himself. He had his hand on his revolver and would not hesitate to use it if it was necessary to protect Faith's father.

Fortunately the blow at Hurd had not struck as squarely as it was aimed, and though Hiram went down he was not seriously injured. The action of Lum gave him time to recover his feet, and by that time he had his senses all about him. As Nibsey came lurching forward he struck out, straight from the shoulder, and floored him like a shot.

After that he hesitated what to do next.

The position had its difficulties. Ordinarily he would have walked away without giving another thought to the man who would not be apt to know what had happened to him for some minutes.

But that would not do in this case. When he did revive Nibsey would be apt to force his way into the shanty; and the shock to the woman within, in her enfeebled state, might prove fatal.

"I cannot move her to-night," he muttered; "and if this drunken tiger is left to prowl around he will have her dead before morning. I must dispose of him in some way. He seems quiet enough just now, but it will not last long. If I knew just how drunk he was I might understand better how to treat him. It won't do to attract attention in this direction, but perhaps I can get him away before he is able to make anything of a racket, and if I could find a place I wouldn't stop much to truss him up, and leave him to sleep off his drunken fit. The mine is too far or I would carry him there. I will try him for a little, anyhow; and if he gets too heavy there is nothing the matter with dropping him again."

Having thus partially solved the puzzle Hiram bent over the fellow, secured a firm grip, and threw him over his shoulder. Then he began to walk away with him.

Lum watched it all with both curiosity and pleasure. He could not think of interrupting Mr. Hurd while he was in a brown study, and afterward was interested in knowing what he intended to do. He remained in the shadow of the house, waiting for an opportunity to follow, and when Hurd had got a dozen paces off with his burden he started.

"Say, this won't do," thought the boy, when he saw that the man had no immediate intention of stopping.

"Dandy may git an 'xplorin' state ov mind, an' find more in ther shanty than rats. You kin

bet ther men ez hez the'r eyes on ther spot are ther ones she don't want ter meet; an' ther fu'st letter ov ther boss's name are Chester Coates I better give him a pointer right now, an' hand over this hyer packidge. It's kinder contry-banned of war, an' I wouldn't like ter be took with it on my pusson. Hillo! Mister Hurd! I've bin a-lookin' fur yer!"

At hearing his name Hiram Hurd halted promptly, and half-turned around. The juvenile voice told him that there was no danger.

"Jest hit it by good luck. Passin' by when I heard ther racket—give an' take, nip an' tuck, an' ther b'ar a leetle ahead. 'Portant bizness with yer, an' ther biggest kind ov a surprise. You're wanted bad at ther Traveler's Home, whar ther's a frien' stoppin' that I reckon you ain't expectin' ter see. Ther first letter ov her name are Faith, an' bin lookin' all over town fur yer. 'Spect somebody else must want yer, fur I seen him a-watchin' that house yer come out ov; but guess his news ain't ez good ez mine. Fact are, yer wants ter walk a chalk line, fur you an' ther kid are both in a heap ov danger."

In his surprise Hiram Hurd almost dropped the still insensible Nibsey.

"Who are you, boy; and what do you mean? Good heavens! Can there be any truth in what you say?"

"I'm Little Lum, a small boy at large, an' I mean jest what I say. Jest investergate an' you'll get ther biggest chunk ov truth out ov ther smallest bit ov money that you ever heard on. I ought ter know fur I helped her through ther racket when Kale Canyon hed his double sights laid on her; an' I brung her inter camp myself. Ef yer wants more proof put that chap in a box an' come along. I kin be givin' yer ther rest ov ther points ez we be goin' along."

"You said something about some one watching this house. Is there any truth in that; and do you know why he is doing it? Perhaps this tale of yours is only to get me away from the spot."

"Not very likely, er I wouldn't hev sed a word about ther man in the distans'. I don't know much about them, but ef I war ter give a guess I'd say thar war a crowd ez hed s'uthin' in fur you; an' war countin' on gettin' it out-ter-night. Bein' a compatible stranger hyer it ain't so easy ter put this thing an' that thing tergether, an' make sense out ov 'em; but Dandy are a-workin' under ther jedge's orders, an' ther rest ov 'em b'longs 'bout on ther same level."

"You can tell the same story twice hand-running, anyhow. And you must have some nerve if you have been dodging that sort of a crowd. I have had some suspicions of them. If Faith is at the Traveler's Home she is safe enough for the present—though it seems to me there must be some mistake about it. If you are not afraid, and want to earn an honest penny or two, help me a little. This brute attacked me in drunken fury and I had to straighten him out. I don't care to do him any serious harm, but it won't do to have him raving around to-night. Have you the courage to watch this place until I get back? I don't care to have anybody enter there for the present. In a quarter of an hour I can bring some one to relieve you."

"All right. I'm hyer—an' so are these weapons. Consider ther place ez safe ez a church tell you git back. Don't waste no time, neither. Pr'aps things ain't ez safe at ther Traveler's Home ez yer thinks, an' ther sooner we git thar ther better."

"You attend to the business here, and do the best you can. A small boy has his own way of doing things. I will look after the rest."

With that piece of parting advice Hiram Hurd once more started off, leaving Lum full of his commission. If Dandy, or any one else, should attempt to force a way into the Nibsey shanty it would be apt to go hard with him.

Anxious to see how things looked, the boy began to prowl around the building. By the time that he had made the circuit he was satisfied that Dandy was no longer at his post. Whether he had gone away to report, or, for some reason, had been withdrawn, he did not know; but he was not entirely satisfied that something would not turn up before the return of Hiram Hurd. He thought he would do some watching himself. He hid not far from the spot where Dandy had been lurking and waited.

He was tired and hungry. He had taken a long ride, and the night before had done without sleep. The hour for inaction had come. There was no immediate call on his services. Without any thought of what would follow he stretched himself at length on the ground, intending only to relax his limbs, and give nature a moment in which to rally.

Nature did rally; and in such force that he was asleep before he could have counted a dozen. As long as he kept himself going he had not felt how far gone he was. When he stopped he stopped all over.

By and by—he had no idea how soon—he was partially awakened by some one stumbling over him. The some one was Hiram Hurd, and his accident was more dangerous than he knew. It

was only by good luck that the boy did not pull the trigger of the revolver he held in his hand.

"Go slow thar, Handcart; an' ef yer tries ter git inter bed with yer boots on look out fer a b'iste," mumbled the boy. "Fur half a minit I thort I war the reptile, Kale Canyon; an' war goin' ter act accordin'. What's ther look out doors?"

Then his head sunk again, and he began to snore.

Hurd was both relieved and alarmed. At first sight he thought something had happened to the boy. After hearing this his fears were aroused for some one else. He caught Lum by the shoulder and shook him. Then he lifted him to his feet.

"See here. Is this the way you keep on the watch? What have you seen? Who uttered that scream?"

The rough treatment—rough, but by no means as much so as he had reason to expect—brought Lum to his senses. He gasped and gaped, even as he quietly slid out of Hiram's fingers.

"What is it, old man? I hedn't fairly shut me eyes fur twenty-four hours, an' p'rhaps ther chances were too much fur me. Didn't hear anything. You say."

"As I came near to this spot I heard a scream, and thought perhaps it was from your lips. Wait for me here. I must see if it's all right inside."

Without delay Hiram darted toward the house, not stopping to note whether the boy followed him or not, though, when he crossed over the threshold, Lum was close behind. A moment later the boy heard him exclaim: "By heavens! she is gone, sure enough. There is not a soul here. It will be her death, without a doubt. There shall be a reckoning for this!"

"Put it down that way in the books," shouted Lum, "but I say ther sooner yer gets to ther Traveler's Home ther sooner you'll know ef it's all right thar. If it ain't, that's what'll hurt, an' don't ye furgit it."

"You are wise," answered Hurd, with sudden coolness. "We will go there at once."

CHAPTER XV.

LOST.

As the two went along Lum told Hiram Hurd the particulars of his meeting with Faith, and how, afterward, being joined by Magdalena, they had made their way to Hard Luck. He was certain of the intentions of Canyon; and just as sure that he was working in the interests of some other man or men; but who he, or they, might be, he was not so sure. From what he had been able to see he thought that Judge Ewing might be at the head of the movement, but there was room for a great mistake, so that he did not care to be positive. If he was not, how was what had happened to be accounted for?

"You have done well, and have the brains of a detective," answered Hurd, when the boy had finished.

"Never fear that you have made any mistake. I know who Harold Ewing is; and if there is any such red work afloat as you speak of, without a doubt he is at the bottom of it. Strange that they should have fallen into the very hands they should have avoided. Never mind. There will be a day of reckoning for all this, and if he has dared to harm a hair of their heads he will wish he had never been born."

"Notter doubt, Hiram; notter doubt; but all ther same it will be just ez rough on ther inner-cent victims. Make ther tracks a leetle longer, an' ther words a leetle shorter. I'm anxious tell I ache ter know how things are at ther Home."

Hurd had stopped to register his vow, and Lum was afraid that he was not going to start again. In fact, the man had 'most too much to think about; and perhaps it would have been an advantage if he had really stopped until his brain grew clear. The admonition of the boy started him to going, and he did not speak or stop again until he had reached the Traveler's Home.

At the caravansary the lights were all out, and the household appeared to be buried in slumber. It was at all times a quiet sort of a place, and the lady of the house was held in high repute by the citizens of Hard Luck. It would not do to storm the house without first trying the effect of a parley. Hiram rapped firmly but respectfully at the front door, and waited till he had an answer.

The person to appear was a young man, known as the nephew of Mrs. Wallace. He knew nothing about the guests, and it wasn't likely that he could find out at this hour of the night. He could furnish a room, and the next morning Mr. Hurd could investigate at his leisure.

"Young man," said Hiram, shortly, "the young lady I am inquiring for is my daughter, and it is important that I see her at once. If you can do no better, call Mrs. Wallace at once, or there will be a catastrophe. I will have no nonsense."

Hiram looked as though he meant what he said, and the young man set his lantern down, and stumbled away, without any more argument. They supposed he had gone to call Mrs. Wallace; but when five minutes passed without hearing from any one they understood that he

had returned to bed and left them to their own devices.

"Break a few winders," suggested the boy. "Play I was a deadly enemy, an' let off a few barrels over me head. That muttonhead's asleep ag'in by this time, an' ther rest don't know we're here."

Hiram did not exactly take the advice; but he began a tattoo which could hardly help waken every one in the house. In the course of a few moments it had the desired effect. Mrs. Wallace made her appearance on the scene. She had evidently dressed in haste, and by the time that Hurd was aware of her presence she had a revolver aimed at his head.

"Oh, it is you, is it? Lucky that I recognized you before something unpleasant happened. What do you mean? I can't allow even you to make such an unearthly disturbance in my house at this time of night. Are you drunk, or crazy?"

"Neither, Mrs. Wallace; but I am very mad. Besides that, I am in a hurry. I want to see two guests who came here this evening—a young lady, and a girl of twelve. Your nephew refused to give me any satisfaction, and very coolly walked away. What is the meaning of that?"

"On the face of things I should say he did about right. When a man who is a comparative stranger to him comes bolting in and has nothing to say more appropriate than you appear to have the less he extends the conversation the better. You had better go home and get sober."

"Still, you do not answer me to the purpose. I wish to see my daughter at once. She was here. Of that I am well assured; where is she now?"

"Your daughter? My dear sir, that is quite a different matter. Why did you not say so at once? If one of the young ladies is your daughter I will call her immediately. This is not a jest of yours I hope."

Mrs. Wallace, decided on her course, made no further attempt at delay. After one sharp look at the man she turned, and went away.

She was only gone a few moments. She returned in haste, and with marks of agitation on her face.

"I do not understand it," she gasped, looking hard at Hurd, as though she suspected that he could give her an explanation if he wanted to.

"They are not there. They are gone. What is the meaning of this? Did you have anything to do with their disappearance?"

"Gone! Heavens! This is a night of appearances and disappearances. I do not believe you. How could they have been removed from here without your knowing anything in regard to the matter? I must see for myself. And I hope that you can show that you know no more about it than I do in case they have been really stolen away."

"You insult me, Mr. Hurd; but if it is true that you are the father of the young girl I can make some allowance. Come with me and I will show you the room they occupied. I am a light sleeper, and only retired a short time ago. It seems impossible that they could have left without my knowledge; though they certainly did. This way if you please."

The widow was careful not to raise her voice, above a low tone, and she stepped lightly as she turned away. If any one of her boarders had been awakened by the noise she did not intend that her words should be overheard. Hiram followed. He believed that he knew almost if not altogether the worst, and was as calm as the calmest after that first outburst. He seemed to have altogether forgotten about the boy, even if Mrs. Wallace had not. She looked around to see if he followed, but he was not to be seen. He was apt to have independent ideas of his own, and always preferred to take his own time and ways for their consideration. When he found that there was to be no immediate assault on anybody, and that Mrs. Wallace was going to stick to the revised tactics, he slipped away. Hiram Hurd might continue the investigation from the inside, but he would see how things looked from without.

Silently he scudded around to the window at which he had taken observations in the earlier part of the evening.

To the uncritical eye everything remained as it then was, but Lum made haste slowly. He looked in through the window, but he was careful that he did not stand immediately under it, or touch with his feet any tell-tale traces that might be there.

He did not care whether Mrs. Wallace saw him or not, but he stood out of the line of the light when she first entered the room, followed by Hiram Hurd. And he listened to see if she kept strictly to the truth as he knew it.

"This is the room," said the lady, with a sweeping gesture. "I understood that they had sent for their friends to call on them in the morning, but wished for the present to be allowed to rest, as they had just come in from a hard day's ride. Indeed, the child was so exhausted that she could hardly stand, and at the request of the other I gave her a few drops of brandy. They lay down at once, and must have slept for some time, to judge by the looks of the bed. But how or when they left is totally unexplained. Judge for yourself."

"They did not leave," answered Hurd, collectedly.

"If they are no longer in the house they were carried away. It is to be hoped that you know no more about it than you have said. I would advise that you make a thorough search of the house. I will see that no one gets away without being seen, and then look outside. There is more need of haste there. And do not forget to tell any one inquiring as to how Hiram Hurd took the disappearance that he said there should be ample punishment for all parties concerned. Good evening!"

Mrs. Wallace would have been willing to extend the conversation in spite of the insult, but the man wheeled abruptly, and went out.

He had noted the window, and like Little Lum had decided that there might be a chance for information in examining the ground near it. It was in what was the rear of the house, as viewed from the street, and if there had been foul play it would most likely have come by that avenue.

When he got there, however, the boy had disappeared, and the print of his foot which was visible in the soft bit of soil, was a puzzle to Hurd, who was certain that if there had been any kidnappers the mark could not have been made by one of them. He searched around a little, and finally found other marks of the same size, and followed in the direction indicated by them, until they led him to the main road, where of course they were lost.

"Pity I couldn't find some of the men to send here," he thought, as he looked up and down the road.

"The house requires watching; and there must be a search both for Faith and her mother. It would be strange if the two should happen together in the same prison place. That is, if there is any prison in the matter. I hope there is, for I hardly think that Ewing would go the length of a double murder at once. He would want first to know that he was unsuspected, or that there was no one on his trail. He is one of your calculating villains; and that is the only thing that gives me any hope. Otherwise, out yonder would be the very place to look for the corpses."

He shivered a little as he pointed at the dark outlines of the hills not far away, and looked up as though there was some one near to whom he was speaking.

He had already decided to turn back, believing that it was useless to continue the hunt any further in this direction without a party to assist him. If what the boy said was true—and by this time he had very little doubt on the subject—the intention was to kill not only the child but himself; and what better opportunity would they want than to have him run alone into the ambushade they might have laid, out yonder in the darkness.

Then he heard something that caused him to wheel, and dash off in the direction in which he had but lately pointed. There was a rattle of firearms, distant but distinct; and he thought that he could discern a cry from the lips of a woman.

CHAPTER XVI.

CALICO DICK TAKES A GALLOP.

During the flurry at the Alhambra Calico Dick found it convenient to withdraw without saying good-by. He had proclaimed himself pretty loudly, but he did not propose to fight the town just then, and when the lights went out it gave him a chance to retire in good order.

He showed no particular haste in his going, and once outside halted for a little, to see if there was to be an immediate outpouring of the guests, or a general outcry for vengeance.

In the room he had left there was some commotion, but nothing like what would have arisen at the Spotted Elk, under like circumstances. He shrugged his shoulders as he listened.

"They take it altogether too good-naturedly to make that a safe abiding place for the wild horse from Rakestraw. When I dawn in on them again it will have to be eyes open and fingers ready. But for the present I guess work will be at a standstill. Mr. Ewing will hardly be in the shape to direct matters, and the rest will hold off until they can find out what is going to become of him. That gives more time. If they have not yet had their orders, they will be in a pretty pickle until he gets around again. I am not entirely sure that the fun is going to pay for the pleasure in this little escapade; but I'll try the lay-out anyhow. Hello, pard! What's the matter with you?"

A man had halted in front of him, and was peering up into his face.

"I war on'y lookin' ter see ef you war a honest man. Ef I hed a lantern I'd find out fur sure; but by yer v'ice I jedge yer wouldn't steal a church, er philon'usly kerry away a dead elerphant. More than that I can't quite make out. Ole Handcart are advancin' in years, an' ain't allers sure a man's honest when he sees him."

"And supposing I am honest, what do you want? Honest men come high, you understand, and you don't want to make a bid that's under a hundred. A character is worth mighty little if it won't bring in the ore when its boss puts himself up for sale."

"That sounds better. 'F you war that kind yer wouldn't hev wanted ter own to it. Mebbe you'll do ter freeze onter. Leastwise, I guess I kin trust yer ez fur ez I kin see, an' that's ther most yer kin say about ther averidge. I might add ther' are a familyer tone to yer v'ice, an' that it 'pears ter me I hev seen yer figger more ner once. Who are yer after now?"

"You must be mistaken, old gentleman. I think I would have known it if you and I had ever met; and it is fun I am after, and no particular individual. If you haven't more to say, you had better bid me the time of day and pass on. I am not the most popular man in Hard Luck just now, and it wouldn't be the square thing to be making new friends, when the chances are they would be sent over the range before the evening is over."

"Now you begin ter shout. That's ther kind ov a pard I'm pertick'lerly lookin' fur. Honest Injun! What hev yer got in yer fur ther man they call Judge Ewing, when they are talking about him 'round hyer?"

"Can't you understand me? I have nothing in for any particular man. I just play my hand to suit the run of my cards, and don't care a doughnut whether the lead is according to Hoyle or not. I take the trick if I have ace, face, or trump to do it with."

"That's kinder disapp'intin' ter listen to, ez I war dead sure that I hed found ther right man when I struck your lay-out. I hev figgered it up, an' figgered it down, an' I'm 'bout sure that you an' him are goin' ter hev a diffikilty. Ther suits me to a jiffy, jest so that you kim out ahead. Yer seen anything ov a gent they calls Hiram Hurd? I hev bizziness with him, an' I'm afear'd that if I don't git ter see him purty quick, he won't be in a frame ov mind fur ther, er anything else. What yer staring at?"

"I am looking at you, old man, and wondering how you came to hit on to that sort of thing to come at me with. Are you in earnest, or are you working the handle of the pump, to see if the well gives rye whisky, or only pure, cold water. Speak up, man, and if you are the sort I begin to think you are, we may come to terms yet."

"I knowed it!" exclaimed Handcart, enthusiastically.

"Ther f'ust time me eyes dropped onter yer I war sure of it. It's just this way. I ain't eenterested much in Hiram Hurd, but I have a leetle pard ez bez took an idear ter chip in a game we come acrost. He's some'eres on ther road, er in Hard Luck, lookin' matters over. I stand along with my pard, and ther easiest way ter do that are ter watch ther judge. Ef we give him rope ernuf I reckon he will give us a fair chance at the end without doin' much damidge. S'pose ye come along, an' we see what's goin' on at ther p'int I hev reason ter think he's aimin' at."

"All right, old man. I am willing to go 'most anywhere if you guarantee fun when we get there. Lead out and I'll follow."

"Kinder figger up ther yer must hev heard ov me afore, er yer wouldn't be so willin' ter pard in with er stranger. Ther name ov Old Handcart are a tour ov strength in itself, an' ther won't be much chance fur ther wicked when we git inter ther trouble."

A quiet chuckle from the old man's lips followed the speech, and taking Dick by the arm he drew him away in the direction of the Traveler's Home.

The man of calico went along without a particle of objection, and his chuckle was just as genuine, though it was inaudible. If there were to be any advantages in the proposed partnership, he was pretty certain that they would be largely on his side.

Nor was he mistaken.

Handcart could have traveled the whole town over unchallenged; but there were men watching for Calico Dick who were anything but friends, and if the opportunity arose they were ready to make the most of it, and put him where he would be no damage to any one else, or good to himself. And in a private sort of way, they were willing enough to drop him permanently out of sight without any opportunity at all.

Perhaps it was their very silence which led them into an adventure. Without noticing it they were both moving like ghosts. With Handcart it was because of second nature, gained by long experience in the wilderness; and with Calico Dick because of his moccasined feet. In that way it came that they suddenly found themselves face to face with a woman, who was stealthily making her way from a cabin that stood at some little distance.

She gave a start and a little cry at the sudden meeting, and then half turned as though it was in her mind to flee.

"Don't be afear'd, purty. Ef yer wants ter go this way we kin stand clean outen yer road an' look ther other way."

Old Handcart saw that the woman was frightened at the sudden meeting, and his words were intended to be reassuring. Someway they had directly the opposite effect. She gave a little cry of alarm, and hastened away faster than ever.

"Queer sorter start, that," said the old man, turning to his companion.

"I wonder—" began Calico Dick, and then stepped forward briskly. He had caught sight of several skulking figures, who were drawing nearer, their heads turned in the direction of the female.

As he stepped out there was the noise of a shrill whistle directly behind the two, that was answered at a little distance by other whistles, and then there was the sound of running feet. A pretty large detachment of Hard Luck's citizens was present.

"Look a leetle out!" exclaimed Handcart. "Ther's hawks around, an' I openyrate that we're ther pidjins that they are lookin' fur. Hyer they come."

He was none too soon with his warning, for, with a yell, half a dozen men dashed into sight, and straight toward the man from Rake-straw.

The latter did not notice them. His eyes were fixed on the woman, who had halted now, on seeing that in turning from the two she was running into the arms of three, and that the trio were not at all disposed to step aside. On the contrary, they darted suddenly at her, one of them threw a coat over her head, and then she was raised by the other two, and hurriedly carried away.

Calico Dick gave a shout and a spring. He was fleet of foot, and strong of hand; and in another instant would have been with them. Instead, a heavy blow took him well up on the head, sending him staggering back, and the stroke was followed up by a rush from the whole half dozen.

"Hyar's yer man; whar's yer rope?" shouted the fellow who had struck the blow.

"Hard Luck justice comes quick an' mighty hard!" exclaimed another; while the rest shouted, "Hang him! Take him around ter look at ther corpus, an' gather in ther boys fur a necktie party! He's throwed Judge Ewing cold!"

Old Handcart saw, when his pard staggered back, that for the present the odds were against them, and that it would be dangerous to interfere; but he did not hesitate. Unwilling to open the ball with powder and lead until he at least saw wh't were the effects of the blow, he threw himself bodily at the struggling knot of men.

"Hold on thar, boyees! It's Old Handcart that's a-comin' now. No clubbin' strangers! Wiggle, cuss ye, but down ye go!"

He had caught the nearest man by the scruff of the neck, and the hip, and with a strength that few strangers would have given him credit for, whirled him from his feet, and slung him fairly forward into the crowd. Then he followed up like a hurricane, flinging them to this side and that, though never striking a blow, until he stood by the side of Calico Dick.

Then his revolvers came out, and as he faced the crowd, he raised them in line.

"Back, cuss ye, ontil ye kin explain what's ther meanin' ov this! I'm a stranger in town, an' I never see'd this man afore ter-night, but I'm allers with ther weaker party tell I hear ther rights ov ther case; an' I'm orful sickness on ther man that puts in a lick frum behind."

And then from the heart of the gang arose the cry:

"That's his pard we was a-lookin' fur; hang 'em both! Down 'em! Ef he kicks, slug him fur keeps!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SANE OR INSANE?

At the exclamation of Matt Hardy there were several curious pairs of eyes turned anxiously toward the judge. Matt had struck the only probable explanation of the strange way in which Ewing had been talking, and if it was the true one there was trouble afoot for those present.

The judge heard the words, but they did not seem to alarm him. His hand went back to his hip with the rapidity with which it had moved more than once during his residence in Hard Luck, and before any one could move he had his revolver out and aimed.

"That sort of a game don't win, as you will find out before I am done with you. I have every man of you down fine, and the most of you look as though you would be willing to cut a throat for a quarter. The first man that tries to stop me drops; and I don't lose track of you all till I get square. Stand aside and let me pass. I don't know where this slum is but it's the last job that will ever be done here, for one while at least."

"Take it coolly," answered Matt, steadily.

"There will be no trouble about finding this place when you want it. All you will have to do will be to inquire for the Alhambra, and Matt Hardy who runs it. Any man in Hard Luck will tell you where it is, and that there is no discount on Matt. You better bunk in to-night, and get a sound sleep. By morning you will get that bee out of your bonnet. And if you have forgotten where you live you just inquire the way to the Great Metropolitan, and when you get there they will show you the way to your room without your having to ask them more than once."

Matt spoke slowly and seriously. His manner

could not help but make an impression. The judge, for the first time looked puzzled.

"The Alhambra may be a very reputable place; but somehow I have been robbed in it, though I begin to think that you may not have had a hand in it after all. What street is this?"

"Don't know that there is any regular name for it, though if you said Main street you couldn't be far wrong. There's nothing else that looks like a street in town. The shanties are dumped down where it is most convenient. Just keep to this street when you go out, and it will bring you to the Metropolitan, all right. If you are not sure of it one of the boys will go along and show you your room. You can go out front or back, just as you want; and if you look for us to-morrow I can assure you that you will find that we have not run away."

The judge made no answer. It was plain to be seen that he did not understand. He only gripped his revolver tighter, and moved toward the door.

"I'll go with you if you say so," said one of the spectators of the strange scene, taking the hint from what Matt had said.

"Very well; but you can gamble on it that if you get as far as the Metropolitan you won't get away until I find out who you really are."

"That's all right. If you have forgotten, ask 'em there and they will give my pedigree from the time I first struck Hard Luck down to the present date."

Was this sort of thing going to be permanent, or was it only temporary? That was the question that Matt had been anxiously asking himself.

If it was temporary the best plan would be to humor the judge until such time as he became himself again; since, in the interim, he would know no more of the Alhambra and its secrets than the veriest stranger. If permanent it would make trouble enough, but there was little danger of his doing any particular damage while wandering at large. Evidently his remembrances of Hard Luck had totally vanished; and he imagined himself at some different time and some different place.

Of course it was no part of Matt's plan to have the judge seen while in this condition, if a night's rest would bring around to what he had been; and so he made a motion that turned the steps of the man who was to escort Ewing toward the private door, which opened out into the street; and through that the two departed.

Coming out into the night, Ewing did not at first notice where he was, but strode on after the dogged manner of a man who is in a rank bad humor but feels that it is advisable to bottle his wrath.

Then he stopped suddenly, stared around him, and finally put up his hands to his face in a bewildered sort of way. He had taken in the straggling street, with its saloons, shanties and stores, and the sight was too much for him.

"What's the matter, pard?" asked his companion, looking back over his shoulder.

"If you feel faintish, or sick, just lean on me till you straighten up. You have had a near thing of it that you didn't go over the range, and you had better have bunked in at Matt's and slept it off. But keep your upper lip stiff. It's not far to the Metropolitan."

"It's not that, it's not that. Where am I? Who are you? Every one seems to know me, and I swear I know none of you, and never saw this place before. How could I have got here?"

"I expect you came the same way as the rest of us did; and I don't believe that you are playing off on me, though it's pretty hard to swallow. As far as I know this is the town of Hard Luck; and I am Bart Walter."

"And who then am I?" exclaimed the judge, fiercely, and giving a sudden clutch at Walter's arm. "I thought I was—no matter who. But perhaps I am some one else. It is just as well to know how crazy I am, or have been."

"Well, about here you are known as Judge Ewing; and if I must say it, they call you one of the solid men of the camp. All of us boys are ready to jump as you whistle, and there isn't a soul in Hard Luck that can scare up a bigger or a better crowd of friends. But I wouldn't stand here talking any longer. Best get under cover. You will understand it all better in the morning."

"I hope to Heaven I will!" muttered the judge.

"As far as I can see, either some one has set up a rise on me, or I must have been, or am, as mad as the maddest. Hard Luck! That sounds like a mining-camp; and I must say that, as far as I can see it, this looks like the sure enough thing. I would have sworn that I had twenty thousand in my pocket at sundown, and that I was in New York City. If I was sand-clubbed and robbed no one can say how long a time has elapsed. I think I will take this man's advice and let everything go till morning. If I think more about it I will go mad again, and perhaps for good. The damage has been done, and there is no hurry to know how to make the best of it. If what he tells me is true I am no doubt a ruined man, anyway."

The judge always had the reputation of being cool-headed; and never had he better deserved the reputation than just now. He turned to Bart Walter.

"All right, young man, everything is square as a die. Lead off. If I have said anything that harrowed up your feelings, you must make the biggest kind of allowance. To tell the truth, I can't quite understand yet what had happened to me this evening. Tell it over to me as we go along; and tell it reasonably slow. I think I can fit the ends together if you prime me with the main points of the argument."

The change in the judge's tone more than half-deceived Bart, who thought that he was coming back to himself, and accordingly told everything which had happened at the Alhambra from the time that Calico Dick had made his appearance there, and started a riot without cause or provocation.

"And this Calico Dick! Is he also a prominent citizen? Or is that a customary thing in Hard Luck—for a stranger to fire at random and then walk away without question or hindrance?"

"Oh, bless your soul! He's a stranger here, sure enough; but, if the boys could have got fingers on him while you were on the floor he would have stretched hemp, sure enough. And if it wasn't that some of them are waiting to see what sort of a lay he is on he would do it before morning, anyhow. But, if he's only a blamed fool it's hardly worth while to waste good rope on him; and if he's a detective they want to know it before he goes over the range. It might be that they would have to walk careful if they don't want the worst kind of an after-clap."

"An elegant sort of a gang I have fallen in with," thought Ewing, with a mental groan, but he said nothing further. He was in deeper water than he had thought, and was not sure that he could afford to move very far from the shore.

And while he was considering the information he had just received, and its implications, there was a hurrah on the street, a chorus of angry voices, and the noise of running feet.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Walter, in some excitement.

"If you want to see how Hard Luck is going to make you even, edge up. It's dollars to dimes that it is the calico man they have got onto, now."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE JUDGE DISSOLVES THE COURT.

THE hour was late, and the more reputable portion of Hard Luck was either in bed, or quietly playing draw poker in the back room at Bill Allen's grocery. The gangs had the street pretty much to themselves.

And even at an earlier hour there would not have been much likelihood of an interruption in such a case. There were plenty who knew that the judge had been shot; and but few were aware of his complete resuscitation. As the calico man was universally spoken of as the party who fired the shot, there would have been but little desire on the part of any one to interfere with the course of justice.

The majority of the party were really in earnest in the belief that they were attempting to administer that same commodity, though there were one or two, who did not attempt at all to appear at the front, who knew better what they were doing. If the judge could have made his appearance a moment sooner, it would have been apt to put a stopper on the whole proceeding.

But before Ewing fairly understood what was going on, the trouble had gone so far that no one was willing to stop for explanations.

It was a strange bit of good luck that Handcart did not get his last sickness on the instant. In the darkness it would not have been hard for some one to have tried a snap-shot, in spite of the weapons that were ready in his hands.

No one tried it, however, and the bluff might perhaps have worked had it not been for a man whom Handcart had not yet noticed. This other man stood just behind him at the moment he uttered his threat: and locking his hands together, sprung at Handcart's back. Bringing his arms down, he pinioned the elbows of the old man tightly to his sides, and at the same time, by a powerful effort, raised him from the ground.

"Hyer, some ov you take his tools, and if he keeps on a-squirmin', better hev a rope, an' be done with it. It's that old cuss that was snookin' 'round town. Bet you he war on this same lay then."

The man was deceived by the weakness of the effort which Handcart made to resist him. He held on tightly enough, but he did not expect any great difficulty in managing the prisoner; nor did he take into account the fact that Calico Dick was yet to be heard from.

The fact was that Old Handcart was looking anxiously in the direction of his partner, waiting to see what he intended to do. He knew that the effects of the blow received would only be temporary, but he was not so certain whether, on fully recovering himself, Calico Dick would want to fight or run away.

But the time came when he could afford to wait no longer. With a sudden and totally unexpected twist and turn he disposed of the man who had been holding his arms, and who had

suffered his gripe to relax a little. The fellow went heels first up into the air, and then lit upon his back with a great thud that said the breath was pretty well knocked out of his body for one while. After that there was a confused melee, in which the man from Rakestraw took a prominent part. Handcart had put away his pistols once more, with the celerity of a man who was used to handling them under all sorts of conditions; and the two stood side by side, making a desperate fight, unconcerned as they seemed to be about the result. They might have broken away and made good their escape, if each one had looked out for himself; but that was not their way; and so they continued to face the odds, with what appeared to be a good chance for victory. Indeed, the old man had just begun a crow, and the Wild Horse a snort, when a fresh detachment of citizens came swooping down on them, to take a hand in the affray.

For a moment it looked as though there would have to be a change in tactics if they were to escape; if indeed it was not too late. Two men could hardly be expected to face a dozen, when the dozen were strong and resolute. And after having received a blow or two, the most lukewarm became heated to the proper pitch for 'most anything. It was just when Handcart was staggering back from a heavy stroke on his forehead, and the reinforcement was about to throw itself with overwhelming force on Calico Dick that Ewing came to the front.

"Steady, you there! A dozen on two is no fair. Hands off, until we see what is the matter here."

"Hyer's another! Now we got ther 'hull gang. Down 'em all together!"

The judge was not recognized, and the wolves were as ready to tear him as they were the strangers.

But the judge had no notion of being torn; and what was better, had a very good idea of how to prevent its being done. He threw himself into a boxing attitude, both arms well up, and then shifted forward to meet the rush he saw was coming.

Straight out from the shoulders he struck, first with one hand and then with the other. He was no novice in the use of his fists, and meantime he dodged his head this way and that, either evading the blows aimed at him, or suffering them to glance off of his skull without the strokes doing him any particular damage. As the two pards were doing their best at the same time, the affray was livelier than ever, and might have continued for some time longer, or perhaps ended with a victory for the minority, had it not been for an interruption.

Upon their first arrival on the ground Bart Walter had been too much interested in the fight to pay much attention to his companion. He knew when the judge halted by his side, to take a look at what was going on; but there could not have been a more surprised man than he was when he heard his companion utter his challenge; and a little later saw him taking a part in the affray, and on the side of the men who, at least, were not his friends. He stood back a trifle, watching. He was willing to fight when it was necessary; but had no yearning to take part in this affray. When he finally saw how things were going, he thought that the time had come for him to contribute his little mite, though not in the way the others were doing it. He caught the nearest man by the elbow and gave him a hard, quick spin.

"You infernal fools! Can't you see what you are doing? You are buckin' on the wrong side. That's Judge Ewing that has just taken a hand in, and you don't want to try to bluff him. Keep out of this, and vanish before he gets guns out. If he once begins to use them he won't stop to pick his friends. I reckon he has use for for these fellows. Anyhow, you can see for yourselves."

He kept in the rear, and was cautious not to raise his voice too high, for he did not care to say too much to those who were not especially of his set. His words had their effect, however. Those to whom he spoke looked again, and then changed base with wonderful quickness. In less time than it takes to tell it there were as many clamoring to stop the fight as there were still urging it on. As they supplemented their words by actions, and acted the new role of peace-makers after the manner of men who were going to quiet things if they had to fight to do it, in a surprisingly short time the riot was over. Three or four remained knocked down, and of the rest some were scowling as though they would be too glad to begin again, and some were only curious to know what was to come next.

"Is this thing settled, or are we to look for more of the same sort, as soon as you get rested up?" asked the judge, scowling around at the faces, which were all strange to him, in spite of the way their owners recognized him.

"I don't propose to be made a chopping-block of by any half dozen or so, that can spare time and attention from this other party; and I don't mean to see two men murdered in cold blood until I know more about the rights of the case than I do about this. What is the meaning of it all, anyhow?"

"It means, jedge, thet if you are standin' pat on that hand of yourn, ez we see it, we are all passin' out, an' jumpin' ther game right hyer, an' now," was the answer of a self-appointed spokesman.

"Ef you're alive an' kickin' I dunno ez we got anythin' ter complain ov. Only, ef them galoots are frien's ov yourn yer better advise 'em ter go slow on promenadin' 'round Hard Luck after dark. It's human natur' ter try ter git even, an' thar's a heap ov black eyes an' bloody noses ter lament over in ther mornin'."

"But I want to know what caused this attack," replied the judge, warmly. "I don't want to appear as a champion for the criminal classes; but I mean even a sneak-thief to have fair play. Is there anything against these gentlemen, that this attack should have been made?"

"Nothin'; only they war hev supposed ter hev blowed ther linen outen yer hat, an' took yer brains along with it. Ef you're sound an' kickin', it's all square with us, an' Matt Hardy kin paddle his own scow, ther next time ther gent goes into ther Alhambry. Ef it's all ther same I move this meetin' adjourns. Jest pass yer frien's along some other way; an' ef thar's arybody here not satisfied, me an' my pards 'll be glad ter arg'y it with 'em soon ez yer gone."

In the light of what had already been told him the judge had a tolerably fair understanding of what was meant. He was cool as an icicle, however, as he drew himself up.

"The party are strangers to me, and hardly to be called friends; but I shall certainly see that what appears to have been a causeless outrage shall go no further."

He turned for the first time toward the two objects of his protection.

Old Handcart was snuffling the blood up into his nose, which had been started by a blow on that now much swelled organ.

Calico Dick stood back with his arms crossed over his breast, taking things very coolly. He did not seem to care how soon the racket should start again. He was very much at his ease, if looks went for any thing; though, in truth, he was watching everybody with an alertness that would prevent his being taken unawares. And between times, as it were, he was studying as well as he could in that uncertain light, his unexpected champion.

"Much obleeged," said Handcart, having at last got the hemorrhage from his nasal organ under control.

"Sooner fight a gang ov 'Pash, er a skit ov wild-cats, than a gang like those. When yer lay them asleep fur good an' all ther' are no after-claps ter look fur, but when yer takes a hand with these, ther more yer sends down ther more yer kin see comin' along, each man with a rope in his fist. An', thunder! Ef ther ropes went whar they b'longed what a raft ov 'em ther would be a-swingin'."

"Exactly, my friend; but as there is no certainty how long this peaceful frame of mind is going to continue perhaps it would be better if you and your friend would retire while the opportunity lasts. If they begin again I might not be able to stop them."

"Sound sense in that—from your outlook. But pard an' me war'n't dead yit, an' didn't intend ter be, long ez we hed our guns ter fall back on. But we're ready ter be goin', ef they don't want all ter stroll our way. Come erlong, pard; an' you stranger, better freeze on. Thar's no tellin' how soon they might come back on ye ef we was outen ther road."

The conversation was carried on in an undertone, and regardless of what was being said by the crowd, which had not as yet dispersed.

The way was open in the direction taken by the men who had carried off the woman, just before the attack by the lynchers began; and as naturally as though there was no purpose in it, Handcart turned himself and Calico Dick on that course.

"Thanks. I believe I will take your advice," said the judge, hooking his arm in that of the man of calico, and the three strolled away, arm in arm.

No one followed. Bart Walter and his friends made a bold stand; and the rest were not as anxious to go on with the lynching act as they had been. No one had been killed, after all; and so that gave the strangers the right to defend themselves to the last gasp, to say nothing of the fact that they were now backed by Judge Ewing. What he said generally went without question. If it did not, his answers were more forcible than polite.

"Yer think we kin strike ther trail ag'in?" asked Handcart anxiously, as they drew out of hearing.

"What trail, gentlemen? I don't want to interfere with your amusements, but as I have taken a hand in with your game I begin to be curious to know what sort of stakes you are playing for."

Very innocently the judge asked the question; but at the same time he was very much in earnest.

"The trail of a woman, who was bein' kerried off by three toughs ez I guess war jest side pards ov a good share of ther gang ez were tryin' ter do us up."

"And the woman—who was she?" continued the judge, growing more interested still.

"I reckon the first letter of her name used to be Diana Coates. If you don't know more about it than I have just told you what are you making all that fuss about?"

For, on hearing that name, Judge Ewing halted as if shot, threw up his hands with the exclamation of, "Good heavens!" and looked as though he was about to faint.

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE FRIEND TRUE, AT ALL EVENTS.

"Don't go to putting on the agony now; there is no time for it," said Calico Dick, looking coolly at the judge. "If you have any interest in the lady, you had better see what can be done for her now, and do your weeping afterward. I judge that she is in the hands of as ruffianly a set as one could want to know, and the sooner she is out of them the better it will be."

As he spoke Calico Dick watched the judge closely. It was not certain whether he was going to be altogether lamb-like under the information; and it was only on the spur of the moment that he had spoken at all.

"See here, men, what year is this? There must be some frightful dream about this, or more has happened than I am aware of. I cannot believe you; yet what interest could you have in attempting such a dangerous joke?"

"It's no joke—when you get to Hard Luck you find the people there not of the joking kind. The question with me is, whether the joke, such as it is, is not on your side of the house. It don't seem to me that you can be as innocent as you try to look."

"That don't answer my question. What year is this?"

"Eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, if the almanacs don't lie. Does that help you any to understand the situation? If it don't there is no time for further explanation. If you don't want to go along with us you can call around in the morning when we will have more time to explain. I begin to think, though, that you are as bewildered as you look; and if it is a true bill I wouldn't mind having you a pard for one night only."

"Eighteen hundred and eighty-seven," repeated the judge. Heavens and earth! I have lost thirteen years out of my life. Go on, go on! I will follow, and speak again when I have more to say. I knew it was bad enough, but I didn't think it was that bad."

"Come on, then. There may be more to say to you when you get in shape to understand it; but just now you seem to have taken in about as much as you can digest. Have you any idea where we can look for the woman?"

"Have I? What do you mean? Why should I? I am as much a stranger as though I had landed here this very night. You seem to be honest men, with a purpose. I put myself in your hands. And if you can, tell me what this is that you have been saying about Diana. How did she—or I, for that matter—come here? Oh, there are a thousand questions I could ask, yet do not care to do it of these wretches who call me friend, and seem to know me best."

"You are in a bad way, then; and have a heap to learn. I am afraid we are too late to do much to-night, but we will take a look over the ground. There may be some traces to be picked up in spite of the darkness; and if she should have given them the slip again we will be on hand to back her game. This time I think she would not run away from us."

It was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, to attempt to find the woman. She had vanished completely, and the men who had spirited her away had left no trail. It was natural to suppose that by this time they were under cover, and though loth to do so, ultimately the three gave up the search; though before that time the judge was a great deal wiser than when it began. Calico Dick imparted his information cautiously enough, but he told sufficient to make Ewing anxious over the fate of the woman, who, he had no hesitation in saying, was his sister. And the worst was that he remembered nothing that could help.

Once they stopped to listen to some far-away sounds; but as they were at the opposite side of the town no further attention was paid to them, after the shooting, which for a little was lively, had ceased.

"Hard Luck is bent on amusement to-night," said Calico Dick, grimly.

"If they all have only held plumb center, the morals of the place have no doubt been helped amazingly. If an epidemic of small-pox, or some other convenient scourge, would only carry off half the population, the balance might be scared into something like decency and second-hand virtue."

For the most part Old Handcart kept silent. He was not altogether pleased with the presence of the judge, and he did not understand at all the game of the man whom chance had made his partner. And since it looked as though there was nothing to be done in this direction he be-

gan to think of getting back to the Traveler's Home to find out how it had gone with his young friend.

"No use, judge," said the calico man, at length.

"Don't want to seem impolite; but there is nothing more that we can do in this direction, for the present, and we may as well give it up. There is some business to attend to that you can hardly take a hand in, and if it is all the same we will separate. If you want any further information I can see you in the morning, and by that time may have something to report."

"Perhaps you are right. You can understand that I have had a shock—three or four of them for that matter—and am no good to-night. I know not who to trust or to turn to. Keep up the search, and if I seem to lean a little heavy on you be sure that I will make it all right in the end, when I find out what and where are my resources."

After that the three separated, and the judge went gloomily toward the Great Metropolitan, the location of which he had inquired for.

He had almost reached the hotel, and was walking slowly, with head bent down while he considered over the later events of the evening, and what might be their meaning, when he heard his name gently called.

"Harold! Harold! Don't let on that you notice any one, but follow me. I must speak with you at once; and it will hardly be safe for me to be seen doing it."

The tones were unmistakably feminine, though he did not recognize the speaker.

"I am at your service, though I do not care to go far. Lead off."

He could indistinctly see the form of the speaker who had hardly waited for his answer; and he followed in her wake for some little distance, until they had come to the shadow of a house, that would hide them from any casual observation. Then the woman turned and faced him.

She was muffled so completely in a cloak that he could see nothing of her face or figure, but when she spoke again he knew that it could not be, as he had faintly hoped, his sister.

"It may be old news but I could not rest until I had seen you. What is the matter, that the gang has determined to go back on you? You are in danger unless everything can be straightened up. Peebles, Hardy, and the rest will kill you on sight if they can do it with any safety; and I never saw men so bitter on such short notice. You know what they are capable of, so you must take care of yourself accordingly. Trust none of them, and if you can, keep out of their way until the storm has a little blown over."

"Thank you, my friend, for the information. I will look out for myself and I guess will manage to pull through. I am sorry if you have put yourself in any danger to warn me. Better to leave me to run my chances than embroil yourself with the innocent lambs of Hard Luck."

"My friend!" laughed the woman in anything but a pleasant key.

"There is something the matter with you, and no mistake. Why don't you call me madam, and get up a little higher on your stilts? You must know by this time I would not stop to think of danger when it was a question of your safety."

"If I must know, then you will have to tell me," responded the judge, who was all at sea.

"I appreciate your kindness, but I swear to you that so far as I know I never saw you before, and that I have not the pleasure of knowing your name. If you will tell it to me you can be sure that it will always be gratefully remembered."

"Are you in earnest?" asked the woman, coming a step nearer.

"Very much in earnest, though I am not able to understand or explain why it is so. I never felt more myself in my life; but there seems to be something wrong somewhere. Perhaps you would go over the ground with me, and throw some light on the dark places?"

"And you do not remember the name of Minnie Wallace; and you have forgotten the message you sent along with the two travelers you directed to my house, this evening?"

"Even so. I remember nothing at all; though you can rest assured that I will not forget you again. What was the message; and who were the travelers?"

"Perhaps it would be as well to tell you nothing more to-night. Yet I must explain, since the girls have disappeared. Not of their own accord, you can be sure. They would not have wakened if the house had been on fire. Some one has carried them off. And then a man who claims to be the father of one of them—Hiram Hurd is his name—came a bit ago, hunting for them. I did not know that they were gone until then. He was savage as a wild man, and for a few minutes I was afraid that he was going to take the house. It was because I started out to tell you of this that I had the opportunity to overhear the little conference that Posey and the others just held. What is the meaning of it all? Have you gone back on them; and who are those girls—one of them is a mere child?"

If Ewing was all abroad as to other things he

showed that he had his wits about him as far as a woman was concerned. Somehow, without any rudeness, and with very little show of presumption, he had already possessed himself of Mrs. Wallace's hand.

A very plump little, soft white hand it was, that nestled into his quite confidentially, and as it were of its own accord. The judge could not help but think that it acted as though it belonged just where it was, and in spite of his general befogment he pressed it in a way that the lady of the Traveler's Home appeared to recognize.

"My dear girl, your questions are all Greek, or worse, to me. I think I recollect enough about the crooked-legged alphabet to spell out easy words; but hang me if I know the first sign of what you are talking about. You are the first familiar thing I have struck since I woke up from a Rip Van Winkle sleep, that lasted longer than I care to count."

Whether I will be this self, or some other self, in the morning I do not feel able to prophesy. Whatever I may be you can rest assured that I will remain the same to you. I know but little about myself, let alone the rest of the world. If Hardy is the man who keeps the Albambra Saloon I had a glimpse of him this evening; and what I saw I did not like. I should say he is a bad man under silken mask, who would smile as he cut one's throat. I can't remember of hearing of Hiram Hurd; and the young ladies are mysteries to me. Keep your own skirts clear, and leave them to the care of Providence. As to the gang that intends to slay me I shall be on my guard—as indeed I would have been even without your warning. I have seen enough of Hard Luck this evening to make me aware that one must walk circumspectly while within its limits. There is one question I would ask you. If you can answer it you will make me eternally your debtor. Do you know anything of a lady in Hard Luck, who might answer to the name of Diana Coates? This seems to be the night for abductions, since she too has disappeared."

"And what is she to you?" asked Mrs. Wallace, sharply, making a movement as if she would withdraw her hand.

"Not what you are, my dear," his mother wit showing him what was the meaning of her tone.

"If she is really here, as I have been told, she is in more trouble than I am; and I naturally take an interest in her because she happens to be my sister."

"Ah! Then I can tell you that I know nothing of her; but perhaps I can find out in the morning. I dare not make any move to-night, for fear they may suspect. Do not forget that whatever else you may do or say, as long as you are true to me I will be true to you. You talk strangely to-night, but I think I understand. If you are not afraid they will murder you in your bed, I would advise that you go home and go to sleep. It may clear your brain up; and I will see you in the morning. No one will suspect anything if you come to me then. Now, good-night!"

"Every one tells me to go to bed," laughed the judge. "And yet, the more I try to take advice the more something happens to interfere. I know very well that I should not keep you standing here; and I am not likely to forget. Good-night, now; and all pleasant dreams be with you. If I was not half convinced that this was all a dream, I believe I should go wild."

A moment later they parted, and the cheek of the fair widow was somewhat aflame, and there was a moisture on her lip, while she thought, as she hurried away:

"I am not sure but what I like him better as he is. If he remains constant I shall continue to adore him."

CHAPTER XX.

A LETTER ON THE TABLE.

THE widow in a few words had explained the status of affairs quite clearly, even though the judge, in his present befogged state of mind, did not entirely comprehend the importance of the situation.

Hardly had Ewing left the Albambra when Matt Hardy, after sending away the two or three men who were left with him, slipped quietly out by the same rear door through which the judge had passed, and a few moments later was having the private conversation with Posey Peebles which Mrs. Wallace had overheard. If she had repeated it word for word, she would not have been better understood, though it might have added to the uneasiness that the judge already felt.

"Curses on the luck!" said Matt, after the first bit of explanation.

"The trouble is to know whether the man is rank, stark, staring crazy, or whether he has just made up his mind to give us all the go-by, and weave the cards again for a new deal. In either case, unless he shows a finer grain in the morning, he will be dangerous enough. If that calico man is a detective, it's easy to tell what he has come to Hard Luck for. And if Ewing is playing off, how are you going to know that it wasn't all a set-up game between them? It makes my blood run cold. He ought to be watched to-night; and if he makes a move to

throw off on us, then, I say, send him to sleep for good and all."

"Don't talk too much, Mathias," answered Posey, after his lazy manner.

"Go and do some of those things, and then tell me about it in the morning. I will keep my end up without advising; and I guess you know what that means. If he was going to weaken on the woman he ought to have thought of it sooner. By this time she is out of his way, and unless he shows pretty large signs of repentance she won't bother him much again. He ought to know what our style is; and I guess when we lay off the law to him he'll think twice before he flinches. If he chooses to stick to us, and planks up a reasonable amount for trouble and damage, let him have the woman. But there must be no backing down about Hiram. If he tries it—wipe 'em both out, and go on with the circus by ourselves. I guess you or I could boss the job for the rest as well as he could."

"Right you are, Posey. But do you know his game clear through—or both of them, for that matter, for he is playing a double sort of a racket, that has kind of beat me?"

"Well enough to have put a spoke in it already. Gurley got a hint from me, and Kate hasn't had it all his own way. Fact is, I should not wonder if you hear that young man has come to grief along the road. I was looking for some sort of a show-up this evening; and I half think the judge has had the tip that there was a finger in his pie, and so thinks he sees his way to shake us. Unless we use sixes it is pretty clear that we can't hurt him much without giving ourselves away."

"And sixes you mean to use, eh?"

"Probably; but we'll ask him up to a family meeting, first. If there is any nonsense about his coming we must set one of the bull-dogs on him, and after it is over let him skip the nation. It won't be safe for him to stay here."

"And if the judge stays away he will have more nerve than most. He will know what that will mean."

"Perhaps, perhaps. But don't crowd the old man too fast. I would just as soon he stayed with us till the end of this deal. It may all be a square enough case as far as it has gone. If it is he can't do much damage till he comes to his senses one way or the other."

"But if it's not a square case, and while we are waiting to see if he gives us away to that detective? That's what troubles me."

"We want to find out when he does—if we haven't been putting them both out of the way before that. That's enough chin for the present. We call him in for a meeting; and if he don't come we bring him. After he gets there we will know better whether he is fit to ever go away again."

"I'll let it rest at that, and get back to my lambs. There will be news in before long, and meantime I'm not going to worry. We hold 'em both in the hollow of our hands as long as they don't pass the word to any one outside of Hard Luck, and I guess we can see that they don't do that. There are a couple on the calico man now, and the chance is that he will be lynched before the hour is out. They don't know that the judge has come to life again, and it won't be hard for them to get up a crowd that will finish the job without any questions being asked."

If the two had known how the judge was, just about that time, interfering in that part of their game, they might have believed more firmly than ever that he was meditating foul play. But the two parted before any report came from the scene of the attempted lynching, and Mrs. Wallace had the chance to steal away to warn Ewing before any fresh move could be made against him. When Posey heard how the judge had taken the part of the man from Rakestraw he also heard that Ewing had finally sought his quarters at the Great Metropolitan, and was supposed to be safe in bed.

"And the Wild Horse from Rakestraw—hope you haven't lost sight of him. It's worth more to know where he goes to to-night, and who he sees, than all this other truck."

"Don't be afeared. Long Pete is after him. I thought I had better come in before all both eyes grew shut. It was a holy slaughter while it lasted, and there will be more black eyes and swelled noses in town to-morrow morning than ever grew afore in a hull year in Hard Luck."

Posey laughed good-naturedly as he listened to the speaker. Judging from the sample optics before him he could well believe that the fight was vicious while it lasted; and he did not care to enlighten the fellow further as to what was the object of the judge in taking the part of the strangers. If Long Pete was on the trail he could be trusted to find out where the calico man went to; whom he saw, and what he did, and take sufficient precautions to prevent his coming upon the trail of Hiram Hurd's abducted wife, if that was what he was looking for now. Meantime, the judge was in position where he could receive a little attention, and Posey intended to see that he got it.

Once in his own room—unfamiliar as it all seemed to him—Ewing found no trouble in getting to sleep by first intentions. Instead of lying awake half the remainder of the night, pondering over the strangeness of the situation,

his head had hardly touched the pillow when his eyes closed for good, and he was sound asleep.

He awoke with a start the next morning, at hearing a hoarse voice bawling, "Breakfast! Breakfast!"

He had hardly noticed the room and its furniture the previous night; and when he looked around him now he rubbed his eyes and looked again, to make sure that he was not still dreaming.

Quite cozy and comfortable it had seemed to him no longer than a week ago. Now, he wondered where the den was, and how under the sun he had come to get into it. He certainly had never slept on such a couch before, and he eyed the pine box that did duty as a washstand, and the bit of a cracked mirror, with disdain.

"If it was a little bit cleaner I would think I had waked up in State Prison. There seems to be a heap to learn before I can catch on to the true inwardness of what has been happening while I have been in this wonderful trance. But if this is the best in town I suppose I must make the most of it until I can get out of it. If that breakfast the fellow is bowling about is in line with this room I think I shall enjoy it—vastly."

He rose leisurely, however, and proceeded to make his toilet.

That brought him to the mirror, and he gave a glance at the image reflected therein.

Then he stared once more. When the thirteen years vanished from his memory they did not take their traces from his face: and they were all there, stamped deeply, and cut clearly, as he, better than any one else, could see.

For a little he was speechless. Surely this could not be. Once he looked furtively over his shoulder to make sure that there was no one behind him who by some jugglery had caused his shadow to be reflected.

"If I felt like that I would hang myself," he groaned. "I was fool enough, and wild enough; but what have I been doing since then?" If I look like that, is there any crime in the decalogue, or any other logue, that I have not committed? And Diana! What is she here for? To save me, or because I have dragged her in my wake like the selfish ruffian that I was? What have I done? What have I done? I could stand the thirteen years, but this breaks me all up. Am I a candidate for the gallows; or only a refugee from jail?"

He might well ask the question seeing all at once the change that thirteen years of the life he had been leading had worked on him. He might have nerves of steel, but this was a revelation that would try them to their utmost.

For a little his head was buried in his hands, while he thought of what might be the dangers of himself and his sister. He had not really believed the calico man the night before. He understood that the man knew who he was; and thought that perhaps he took that method to try him. He believed it all now. From speculation as to what he would have to do if it were so he was forced to think what he would do now that he knew it all was so, and that Diana was in danger, if she had not already come to harm. When he looked up he saw, propped on the table, a note; and as the inscription was written in a loud hand he read it at a glance.

"FOR JUDGE EWING,

To be read first thing in the morning."

Here was the next move in the game. He was sure that when he opened the missive he would be wiser as to what he had been doing, and would know better what he had to fear. Yet he hesitated to read. If he was a coward just then, what wonder?

When he did read he understood, though the words were few, and were less innocent than they looked:

"Meet with the firm at ten to night, and be careful who you talk with to-day. If you don't come no one will ask the reason why, but will act accordingly. If you have forgotten the way, hang up a white flag, and there will be some one on hand to show you the ropes. The ladies are all safe, and depend entirely on you for the future."

"MANY FRIENDS."

Once, twice, the judge read this over, until he had mastered it. Then he slowly tore it into bits, and thoughtfully proceeded to dress. Before leaving the room he hung an end of the moderately dirty towel out of the window; and then, with an outward composure at least, went to breakfast.

CHAPTER XXI.

LITTLE LUM AT LARGE.

IT is possible that Little Lum, being a small boy, may be in danger of being altogether overlooked, so that it is best to go back a little and see what happened to him—or how he happened to other people—after separating from Hiram Hurd.

Looking through the window, as Mrs. Wallace showed the room lately occupied by the two missing young ladies, he had a fair view of the face of the landlady.

He studied it closely, and made out that she was as much surprised as any one over the disappearance of her guests.

"That settles it," muttered Lum.

"She ain't in ther house, an' it's no use ter linger. Bet a dollar thet while I war squintin' 'round town Kale arrove, an' put his best foot in front. But how in thunder could he 'a' kerried all two ov 'em? Must hev hed ther gang at his back. Don't 'pear ter be likely he'd do ary thing in ther throat-cuttin' line in sich a public place; an' ef he goes fur he's sure ter leave a mark er two ahind. I better be a-'hoopin' it up in ther rear afore ther percesh hes got too fur outen range. Hiram kin paddle his own canoe; but I'd give a heap ef I could strike ther old man jest now."

He waited no longer but began cautiously examining the ground, going over it in an ever-increasing circle. The location of the Home was such as to make the abduction a matter of little danger, but there were half the points of the compass to steer for. In the end Lum went over the same ground that was covered a little later by Hiram Hurd.

As he went first he went further. There was something of the greyhound about him, and he ran more by sight than by scent. To his eyes the ground over which he was going seemed such a likely course for any one to take that he thought he had better keep on following it.

He had gone some distance before he dropped to the ground like a small boy who had suddenly been shot.

"Well, I will be hanged!" he thought to himself. "This beats me. Sure as sticks I've got in front ov ther percession, when I o'rter bin at ther tail end, by all rights. If not, what's comin' now?"

Lum was not aware of the fact that hardly had Hiram Hurd followed him away from Nibsey's cabin when the woman returned for a moment; or that, a little later, she was captured by the trio who had been in pursuit of her. After they had once made the attack they felt that it was folly to abandon their captive, and they held to her, doubling on the trail, and carefully keeping out of sight of any casual wanderers who might not be interested in the little neck-tie party over the calico man. They lost some time in that way, and so fell in behind the boy, whose quick ears alone saved him from being overtaken at a disadvantage.

The three men were evidently tired of carrying their prisoner, who showed a strength which surprised the young watcher. Though she leaned somewhat heavily at times on the arm of one of her captors, she walked doggedly on, like one who had made up her mind to the worst, and was anxious to have it over.

They all passed the boy, who was crouching in the darkness, without a suspicion of his presence. Lum lay still for some time. He did not intend to let them get so far away that their footsteps could not be heard, or their outlines perceived on favorable occasion. At the same time, he did not intend to get too close, unless he could do so under better cover than there was available.

"Guess it's time now to rise up, William Reilly, an' go along with them. Won't do ter git too close till they come to their hole. A fight ain't what I'm a-aimin' at. My side are jestic side; but thein bez ther heft ov ther shootin'-irons; an' they ain't sufferin' frum consuness skrew-pels. They would make it warm, 'less I shot three er six ov 'em ez a starter; an' they might be doin' su'thin' in that line ez I went along. Guess I'll foller at my ease, an' see whar they go to. Ef they try anything like bloody murder, in course I'll be 'round; but this looks like a case when I need a pard er two ter shoulder ther responsibility. This are whar ther trainin' in the woods comes inter play."

He had started as he began his reflections, and was walking noiselessly but rapidly. Unfortunately he was not aware of the fact that one of the men was not walking at all. Without any suspicion that any one was near, or had observed, he fell back and threw himself on the ground while he turned his face toward the town. There might be pursuit in spite of the fact that they had left the only men who had seemed to notice them so well engaged.

In that way Lum happened to walk directly into the unintentional ambushade. The man heard him coming, partially raised himself, and from a distance of but a few feet made a spring.

An ordinary man would have been caught on the instant; but, Lum, though not on his guard, had the advantage over an ordinary man. He ducked so rapidly that the fellow's fingers went over his head; and as he ducked he turned, and sprung out of arm's reach. After that the advantage was rather on the side of Little Lum.

It would have been decidedly so if he had been willing to take the advantage he had for a shot before the man could get at his revolver; but the boy always intended to leave his fire-arms as a last resort, and all he tried now was to get away. He bounded off at a great rate; and his face was turned away from the town.

The man saw that he was too late to catch him, and was in a rage to boot. Without waiting to think he tore out his revolver, and took a snapshot at the little figure.

Luck was on the side of the youngster. At that instant he tripped and fell, and the bullet went humming so closely over his head as he went down that he knew how narrow his escape had been.

Again the outlaw, or whatever he was, bounded forward; but again he just missed his prey. Lum was no sooner down than he was up again, and darting to one side. Two or three shots followed him, and then he was lost in the darkness without the man being able to find out whether or no he had hit his mark.

He hesitated, half inclined to follow; but he had heard a cry from the woman when the first shot was fired, and his comrades were anxiously calling to him to come on. He moved a step or so in the direction taken by the boy, glared around in a useless search, thought that he heard his footsteps already quite a distance away; and then followed on.

He had little to say for himself when he caught up with the rest. Now that he had time to think it over he was ashamed of the nervousness that led him to shoot at a boy, whom he felt sure he could have run down and captured without any noise at all. He hardly cared to answer the questions that were asked, but he did do it after a fashion that was tolerably near to the truth, except that he led the others to infer that it was Lum who fired the first shot; and that it was more than likely the lad was lying somewhere off the trail, with a bullet or two to keep him company.

"If thar's anybody comin', that settles it. They'll folly that noise like a hound on a jack-rabbit. No use ter lay back an' see; but what we want to do are ter git outen ther way. This hyer maiden will hev ter put a better foot for'rads, er we will hev ter be totin' her along a heap sight faster."

The prisoner kept silent, but as if to settle the question she suddenly swayed away from the arm on which she had just been leaning lightly, and dropped senseless, in a heap. Exhausted nature could do no more and it mattered little to her, just then, whether she lived or died.

"Blast the job anyhow," snarled the last speaker.

"Ther reesk ain't ther meanest part about it, an' Lord knows there's ernuf ov that. Mebbe we better finish it up right now, an' skip out 'thout waitin' fur a check on account. What we goin' ter do now?"

"Why, kerry her, jest ez you were sayin'; an don't be fiddlin' over ther job. You know ef you were to try to cut yer work ther boss'd give yer ther check, anyhow; an' it would be writ with cold lead. That sorter thing yer speaks ov may come arterwards, but we ain't got ther orders fur it yit, an' until we does I ain't makin' my mommy's eldest a rank, blank fool, an' I'll see thet you ain't doin' ary thing ov the kind on yer own account. Sabbe?"

"What you says goes, 'specially ef yer p'int it off with yer six after that fashion. Ketch hold, an' we'll git outen ther draft ez quick ez we kin."

There was no more delay, and so Hiram Hurd's wife, still remaining insensible, was carried away between them. When she opened her eyes again she had been lying for some time on a rude couch in what she at once recognized as a subterranean retreat of some kind; and she was alone with another female, in as bad plight as herself. For a time she remained motionless, feebly glancing around her by the light of the flaring torch that was hanging from the rock in one corner.

Then she heard a voice weakly saying: "Faith! Faith! Are you there? What has happened?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE JUDGE MEETS HIS GUIDE.

"ARE you sure he will come?"

The speaker was Matt Hardy; and he was looking doubtfully at Posey Peebles, who was as fat, smiling and unconcerned as ever.

"Sure, nothing! One can only be sure that there is going to be an end of all things. But I should judge that he counts on coming, or he would not have stuck the end of a towel out of his window before he went to breakfast. If he don't come, he knows what to expect; and we know what he will get. That ought to be satisfactory."

"Y-e-s," said Matt, slowly; "but it has taken a heap of waiting to find out what we ought to have known the first thing in the morning. Why didn't you just tell him to walk up to the captain's office and explain as soon as he had the note?"

"That might have been the best thing, Matt; but I wanted to give him a chance to get his wits about him, and to look him over a little by daylight."

"Well, you had the chance; what does he look like? Any better sort of a man than he was last night?"

"To tell the truth, Hardy, there was where I tripped up. I haven't had a chance to see him, after all. One of the boys saw him scouting somewhere near the widow's; and then, somehow, he vanished."

"You don't think they went off together, do you?"

"Not very likely. Whatever the judge has got into his noddle to do, he's not going off. Mrs. Wallace says she don't know anything

about him; and out at the mine they tell that he hasn't been around all day. It's barely possible that he has had to lay off from that bite on the head. I'd sooner know what had become of Mister Hiram Hurd, and that calico man from Rakestraw. It's a little odd that we can't hear a word of any of them. They may be scouting around after the women; but so far they haven't hit the trail, and I guess they're not going to. Long Pete tripped up for once in his life."

"It's time we were hearing something about some of them; but all the same, I wish the hour was a little later. If there is going to be any big flare up before this thing gets over, some one may be asking fool questions what Matt Hardy was doing away from the Alhambra so early in the evening."

"Let 'em ask. These vigorous people that waste their substance on other people's business, never amount to much anyway. I'm in the same boat, and I'm not worrying yet, that I know of."

"That's well enough for you, who never get nervous over anything, but we don't seem to be built over the same model. If they are coming, it is time that we began to hear from them. Long Pete won't run many risks when he takes him in tow."

"Correct you are. All I am afraid of is that Pete will be so careful that he will bring his corpse in to the consultation. The boss will meet a cold wave if he tries any funny work with Brother Haverly."

Posey Peebles and Matt Hardy were talking over matters while they waited, and their conversation gives the key to the situation as they understood it. The judge had disappeared; so had the man from Rakestraw, and Hiram Hurd. Little account was taken of Old Handcart, and none of the boy known to the reader as Little Lum, though these two were also missing. For all his imperturbability Posey had kept his scouts pretty busy during the day, looking for the missing men, and had wondered enough where they could have to gone. At the same time he believed that the judge would turn up that evening according to sunamons. He recognized as well as Hardy that they were taking some desperate chances if Ewing intended to play any game on them; but, to tell the truth, there was nothing better to do. The chance to kill him outright had gone by, and neither of them were the men to run away until they were certain of danger.

If they could have got Mrs. Wallace to speak, that lady might have told them a good deal; but she was a friend of the judge's, and not of the others. What she knew she was keeping religiously to herself. And, unfortunately, she knew nothing of the under workings of the gang, and so could not supply the missing memory of a sorely puzzled, and deeply troubled man.

She had been making some inquiries for him; but all that she learned shed no light on the present condition of affairs. A woman had been in Hard Luck, who might answer to his missing sister. She had rented a cabin of Bill Allen, and had lived there quietly for a few days. Now, the cabin was vacant, and the woman who had lived with her was also missing. Hiram Hurd had vanished, and nothing could be heard as to the time of his going.

"The best plan would be to go down to see these men at once, and have it out with them," was what the judge said to the widow, when he heard her report.

"You want to take a regiment along with you, and begin by a little judicious shooting," answered the widow, who had managed to accommodate herself to the changes in Ewing.

"You and I know that they are up to some wickedness, but beyond the disappearance of your sister it is not so sure what it is. Hiram Hurd might tell you something more about it if he was willing, but Hiram is not to be found; and I wouldn't wonder if he would be looking at you with some suspicion. You can't go down there and ask Matt Hardy what villainy he is up to that you can shoot him for. And I am afraid it won't be safe for you to rustle around town too much till you understand better what a change has come over you, and what sort of people they were that you were mixed up with. Better keep cool and wait. They will show their hand soon enough."

"You are right. I will wait—wait till tonight. There will be developments of some kind when I meet the gang. I will keep quiet till it is time for the rendezvous, and then follow the guide they are going to send me, like a lamb to the slaughter. Perhaps, when I get there, they will find that the lamb has turned into something else."

"Very well—if you are sure that you can shoot as straight as ever."

"Not much doubt about that, if I have been keeping my hand in for the last thirteen years. I learned before that; and won't have any hesitation in doing my best with such men as these."

"And you are sure that you are done with them and their schemes forever? Remember, you have told me a great deal; and given me a chance to guess at as much more."

"Can't help what I have told you, or what I have been doing. I am aware of the fact that

I never was a saint; but all the same, so long as I am in my right mind, I would not have dealings with men of that stripe. And though I suppose they cannot have had any hand in it, I feel all the same that they robbed me of the twenty-thousand dollars that was in my pocket the last thing I remember until I woke up last night. Confound that fellow! I don't know whether I ought to go down on my knees to thank him for bringing me back to myself; or, shoot him on sight for making me another man. It seems that I had you as a more than friend in either case. Of course I am going to find out what really did become of that roll of notes, and where I went to; but I shall not run my neck into any noose doing it; and first of all I am going to fathom this Hard Luck game, and find Diana if she is really here. What they can want of her, unless it is for a hold on me, is more than I can guess at. Once safely in my hands and she can explain, however; and probably tell me all that I want to know about the past."

"And perhaps have something to say about the future," suggested the widow.

"But of that I must run the chances. It is enough that for the present I am with you, and if you have no other friend in this town that you can trust you can rely on me. Whatever you are, so you are true to me, you will find me ready to help you to the last gasp. I am glad for myself that you never were a saint, and just as glad that you are going to break off with these men—if you can. But you had better beware of this calico man. If he is not a fool he is a knave; and he may work you worse harm than these others have thought of. Remember. If you have been leagued with Posey Peebles and the like, you may have as much cause as they to fear a detective."

"Very likely, my dear; very likely—if I was one of the fearful sort. I shall look out for him, and see that he does not get away, with my luggage; but for the present it looks as though we could work on the same level without too much friction. Now, good-by. It is time to show myself where my guide can get at me; and a little later the war will probably begin."

He saluted the widow gallantly as he ceased speaking, and managed to steal out of the Home without being seen. A little later, as he was idling in front of the Metropolitan, Long Pete came strolling by.

"Evenin' judge. Yer friends hev bin a-wonderin' all day whar yer hed dropped to. Goin' my way, now?"

"Hardly know," answered the judge, who thought he recognized his guide. "About what time might it be?"

"Close on to ten o'clock, an' ther boys are all a-waitin'."

"Lead off, then," answered the judge. "I guess I'll stay with you."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MAN WITHOUT A HEART.

ENOUGH had passed between the two to enable them to identify each other; and yet there was nothing said that could not very handily be explained in case there was to be treachery on either side. Long Pete had a vicious record, perhaps; but there was nothing in the past of the two that would excite remark in case they were seen going down the street together at that hour of the night. Pete did not think so, at all events; and to him it seemed a stupendous joke, which he more than half-believed Ewing would finally explain, to the confusion of his doubting allies.

It would have been hard for an outsider to have seen that Pete was leading the way, so readily did the judge conform to his movements; but lead it he did, until they brought up in front of the Spotted Elk.

"Guess you're goin' ter step in hyer a bit. It's your regular stampin' ground this time in ther evenin'," suggested Haverly.

"About as soon go one place as another. It's time for irrigation, and Posey can set up something fit for a man to swallow."

"It's the best lay-out I can find," said Pete, as he led the way through the open door.

Everything was running along inside about as usual, save that Posey was not visible. He had vacated his chair a few moments before; but Johnny and the other assistants were abundantly able to keep things going without him.

"You kin nod to everybody, an' needn't talk a bit more ner yer wants to," suggested Pete. "That's about yer usual style. And yer don't want to be in too great a hurry a-gettin' up front. They might think thar war somethin' special afoot, an' spot yer accordin'."

Ewing looked around. There was not a familiar face there; but on the hint of Pete he nodded and smiled at everybody that caught his eye. The looks of the frequenters of the Elk were not much for style, but the judge mentally decided that it was not altogether a den of thieves.

Plenty of roughs and hard cases were there; but there were more who belonged to the happy-go-lucky stripe, who did not care a bit where

they were so they had a good time, and plenty of benzine.

"Dry, are you?" asked the judge after a few moments of dawdling. "If you don't object, let's try those samples now."

But Pete gave no answer. He was looking toward the door; and as Ewing waited for an answer his lips moved, and he muttered:

"Here's Satan too. An' if it ain't him it's ther calico man. What's goin' ter happen now?"

Following the direction of Haverly's gaze he saw his companion of the previous night, standing just within the door.

Of course he had not a very good view of him in the darkness there; but it was not hard to recognize him. He was still dressed in calico, though the suit was of a different pattern. There was a good-humored smile on his face as he surveyed the crowd, which was not, as yet, generally aware of his presence.

"Here I am once more, the Wild Horse from Rakestraw; the woolly, untamed terror, with hoofs of steel and teeth that can bite through a handsaw. Just boiling over with good will to all men, and half dead to do the big thing for Hard Luck. More money than a hog-drover; and no committee in lunacy to say whether I shall throw it away if I want to. Been looking out all day for a man of sand to see me, and not a one showed up. Had to go out and look for that pard who wants his everlasting fortune made. Where is he? And if he's nowhere, where are the gentlemen who wish to drink at the expense of Calico Dick of Rakestraw?"

His tones were more genial than they had been the previous night, but there was no trouble in recognizing them, and the advent created something of a sensation; which Calico Dick did not seem to notice as he airily made his way directly toward the bar.

In front of Ewing he paused and held out his hand.

"Much obliged for standing by me last night when I was in here. And you too, Haverly. Come along up and drink with the crowd. Guess there will hardly be another racket, and my stamps will be talking with me right along. Have been looking for you all day, Peter; but they told me you wer'n't in town. Have a good time where you went to?"

"Elegant," answered Pete, who would have given something nice to have dispensed with the calico man at this precise moment.

"And if you don't watch wide out you will have a better one. After the sort of a racket you drew me inter last night, down at Hardy's, I should hev thought you wouldn't hev cared about seein' me fur a month ov Sundays. You wouldn't like ter meet me thar a liddle later? Jest now I hev private bizness that I ain't puttin' off longer than I kin take a drink with ther first man that will pay fur it."

"Meaning me, of course. All right. Here we are. Hit it hard; and when you come back you can try it again. Nothing small about the Wild Horse, and I have a heap of questions to ask. Here you are."

This time Johnny set down the glasses and decanter without demur, and having done so he managed to lean over and whisper to the judge:

"Mr. Peebles wants to see you a moment about that matter you were speaking of the other day. If you will just go around to the back door, outside, he will let you in. I'll keep your friends busy till you get back."

"All right, they can wait; and don't be too rough on our friend in calico. He is worth something to me in a business way, or I am badly mistaken. I don't want Hard Luck to strip him until I have had a chance to size him up."

Then the judge emptied his glass, whispered a word to Calico Dick, and another to Pete, and went out at his leisure. He was not sure that Haverly was done with him; but if Peebles was one of his "many friends" he was ready for the interview.

He found the door without any trouble, and gave a gentle knock. When he had repeated the signal the door opened of what seemed its own volition, and he could see a lamp glimmering in the darkness.

"You better turn the light up. Posey had to go out, but will be back in a minute or so. Make yourself at home."

"Of course I will; I generally do," responded the judge, stepping off toward the lamp. He was not certain that there was not a man with a club lying in wait for him, and he glanced warily around; but he was not sufficiently suspicious to keep his place near the door until Posey arrived. If he had done so he might have had a long wait. Instead, he took bad advice—and found soon enough what it led to. Before he had half crossed the room he felt the floor yield to his foot, and as he tried to spring back, a section of it, half a dozen feet square, dropped from beneath him, and he went downward with a crash. He did not fall far; but when he stopped he did not move, and for a few moments was as motionless as a corpse.

When he opened his eyes again he was reclining on a rough box, and two masked men, one of whom held a lamp, and the other a revolver, were bending over him.

"Good heavens, Matt! What's the matter

now? What has been going on, and how in thunder did I get here?"

He raised himself to a sitting posture without appearing to notice the revolver in the hand of the man he addressed.

"You tell; you ought to know something about it. It's mighty few people get here that don't know the road."

"But that's just what's the matter. As far as I know I ought to be standing in front of your bar, waiting for some one to turn on the lights again. I must have got a crack over the head from the way it feels, but that don't explain how I got here. Did you fellows carry me, and if you did what did you mean by it? Talk quick, now; and don't dodge around the bush. There's something not on the square about it. You mean foul play with me. Try it if you dare."

The judge glared at the two men, and made a motion as though he was gathering himself for a spring, but fell back again with a scornful laugh as he waited for an answer.

And Matt Hardy was puzzled.

If the judge had lost his identity at the Alhambra the night before, through the effects of the shot that had creased him, might he not have found it again through a blow he received when tumbling head-first from the trap into the den? He seemed very like himself in his worst mood. It might be that he had never lost his memory at all; but he certainly had it now, or else, how did he recognize his surroundings? He was puzzled how to act and turned to Posey.

Posey was not puzzled at all, because, whichever way it was, it made no difference to him. If the judge attempted any violence he intended to run no risks, but shoot at once, whether the man was sane or insane. He spoke up after his oiliest fashion:

"That sounds like a true bill. We mean foul play right straight along unless we know that you ain't thinking of going back on us. In such cases there is nothing like getting in the first lick. We understood that after you had rung the gang into this thing you meant to sell us out to a bloody detective. Unless we are sure it's not so we intend to kill you before you get out of this. And we got to be very sure. A little hard swearin' won't do a mite of good. We want the thing that we can gamble on every time. What we want to know is, how you are goin' to give it to us?"

"That's your game, is it? I'm in the way, and you think it's time to make me retire. You have the drop on me, so I don't try to hurry the funeral, but if you want to push this thing you have got to shoot very quick and straight when you make up your mind to pull the trigger. If there is any detective in camp it's the man I set Long Pete on, and if he didn't give me this headache it must have been one of you who took the chance to lay for my life, and just missed getting the turn."

"There's something in that—if you hadn't been running all over town with him, and chipping in just as some of the boys who couldn't see through a stone wall were getting ready to send him over to never come back again. What were you doing with him in tow, last night?"

"That's simply a lie out of the whole cloth. I never saw the man before, he came into the Elk, but I thought I spotted him as a spy, or something worse. I had a few words with him, and then left him in Pete's hands. A bit later they came into the Alhambra together, and then you, Matt, kicked up the row with him that laid me out. Where is he now? Did the boys do him?"

"It won't work, Harold; it won't work," answered Posey, not a particle moved.

"I guess I will have to take hold where you left off, and run things to the end of the chapter. I think maybe I can do as well out of things as we have 'em set up, and I'm open to a small bet that there will be more profit in it for the family even if you were to finish on what you call the square. We have all the important parties, and if we don't know what to do with 'em we can pinch 'em till they squeal and let us know. You are apt to be tender-hearted, Harold, when a woman is concerned. What we want at the head is a man with just no heart at all—and I am that very identical individual."

"Heart! Right you are. You have neither heart nor soul. But I warn you to let the woman in Nibsey's cabin alone until I have seen her. A little shock might kill her now, and we are not ready for that, yet."

"Don't worry about the woman. We have her safe enough and she stood the shock like a little lamb. There's a regular gold mine in her if we work her right and if we don't do that same thing it will be because Posey is a bigger fool than he looks. Kale Canyon didn't kill the kid according to orders, an' we got her too."

"The kid! What do you mean?" exclaimed the judge, surprised out of the line he had adopted.

"Thought we would catch you up before the evening was over. The kid happens to be her daughter; and if I'm not wide off the first letter of her father's name is Hiram Hurd. There's a pile of rocks waiting for the two, back East, and though the contract may be a hard one I wouldn't wonder if Posey Peebles could make it materialize as well as Chester Coates. That's the

lay-out; can you tell me where you would come in?"

Before he could answer there came an interruption, startling as unexpected. The trap dropped behind them, and some one else came tumbling down into the room.

CHAPTEL XXIV.

THE SCALES ARE TURNED.

EWING had played the game that he had determined on, and had lost, owing to the suspicions of Posey Peebles. Though utterly in the dark so far as his memory could serve him, he had the points that the landlady of the Traveler's Home had furnished, and the uncertain information given him the night before by Calico Dick, to guide him; and he was willing to run the risks.

If he had not gained the confidence of the ruffians, he had secured some information that had nearly taken his breath away. It must be so, that his sister was in the hands of these villains; and what was more, her child was with her. Who the child was, where it came from, what he had schemed to do in his madder moments, were alike mysteries to him, but through his mind like a flash darted the knowledge of who Hiram Hurd must be.

And then came the interruption.

Instead of unnerving him, as it did the others, it brought his senses all back, and the instant that Matt turned his head, at the sound behind him, the judge sprang like a tiger at the proprietor of the Alhambra.

In a hand-to-hand struggle there were few better men than Hardy; but Ewing was one of them, besides having the advantage of the surprise. He caught the revolver and forced the muzzle upward, at the same time striking as hard as he knew how.

Down went Hardy in a heap, and then Ewing wheeled toward Peebles.

When the conversation had fairly commenced, Posey had set the lamp down, and thrown himself into a seat that was as rough as the lounge which the prisoner occupied. Through the interview he had sat there twirling his thumbs, and not offering to produce a weapon. After the first quick glance at the intruder, his gaze went back to Ewing, while his hand went to his hip, in search of the revolver that was always there when not in use.

"Easy, Mister Man," shouted a boyish voice. "One or the other of us has got you, certain. If you pull on him, I've a finger on the trigger that will crook like lightning; and if you turn your attention to me, he's bound ter take yer in. I'm Little Lum, the boy without discount, and certain death every time I shoot. Let's bargain a bit. Thar's no use fur both ov us ter go out dead, and s'long ez ther trap-door's open the sound'll go inter ther next room lively, an' no mistake."

As the boy said, the trap was still open, and Little Lum never offered to move off of it, knowing that it was his weight which held it open. He was squinting along the barrel of the revolver he had held on to in spite of the shock.

"Yes, yer needn't look so grum; I got yer whar I want yer, an' yer may ez well come off ther roof. Seen our frien', ther jedge, go in hyer, an' ther thought struck me Id' stick closer than a brother. I snooked 'round a bit, an' landed hyer when I warn't lookin'; but I've come ter stay, and yer don't wont ter furgit it."

Posey hesitated. He was caught between the two fires, and was sure that the boy told the truth when he said he would shoot the moment that Peebles attempted to draw a bead. If it had been a man speaking he might not have waited. He would have shot at Ewing first and run his chances with the boy. But there was such an accent of truth about the lad that he dared not risk him. And he knew what it meant if he gave the judge any chances in the game. That meant certain death.

"All right, pard. The advantage is with you, and you may have the say-so. Do your talking quick, for there won't be much time for you to waste in fooling. If you try to go out you will meet the boys; and if you stay here they will have you anyhow. It's bad lines for you; and the kid will catch it hotter yet."

"We will run the chances, all the same. We can't be any worse off, and may be better. Hands up, Posey. You wouldn't listen to reason while I was trying to talk it; and now you must take what comes. I guess I'll explain a wrinkle or two to the boys that you and Hardy would scarcely have cared to have them hear. No fooling, but fingers up and empty."

The order of the judge, as repeated was sharp and decided. Posey recognized that he had lost his chance, if he had ever had any, and obeyed.

"Sensible at last. You brought this on yourself. When you think it over perhaps you will see where you made your mistake; and I mean to give you all the chance for reflection that you can get."

He lost no time in relieving Peebles of his weapons, and then, telling Lum to keep him covered carefully, he seized his wrists with a

quick grasp, and in a moment had him powerless for harm.

"Reckon it's no use ter be holdin' onter this trap no longer," suggested the boy, when this had been accomplished.

"Don't s'pose they're fond ov jumpin', an' thar must be another way out that won't be so hard ter climb. Look 'round a leetle."

"If I mistake not the way is yonder," answered the judge, pointing toward a door at the further end of the room.

"It may be as well for you to keep your place until I see, however."

"Hurry up, then; fur thar's music in the air, an' I don't want lose a chance for fun, if thar's any a-goin'."

Ewing's guess was a good one, for the door proved to be unfastened; and beyond it was a stairway, leading to the upper regions.

"We will try it; although I ought not to leave the villains until I forced from them some explanations of what was done last night; and what their scheme is for the future."

"You let Posey alone; he's not ov the forcin' kind. Ef I know ye'r on ther squar' I may tell yer a leetle meself; an' I dunno but what I kin talk ez much ez any ov 'em, an' put a trifle more marrer inter what I say. I'm Little Lum, you onderstand; an' I know a heap."

This in a low tone, as he followed the judge up the stairway, which brought them in safety to an unlocked trap, through which they passed.

As the judge vanished Matt Hardy began to show signs of returning consciousness. He gasped once or twice, wriggled about on the floor, put his hand to his head gingerly, as if he was half afraid of the damage that might have been done, and then sat up and looked at Posey.

The latter was not throwing away an ounce of exertion. He was satisfied that he could not effectively move hand or foot, and he knew, since the trap had again settled to its place, that he could not make himself heard by any one above. But he was pretty sure that in due course of time his companion would come around and help him out of the scrape. Ewing had neglected to tie Hardy's hands, and Matt had too hard a head to be cracked at a single stroke.

"Hope you are satisfied," were Matt's first words.

"I tell you, he was coming around all right, and would have been on the square in another minute, if you hadn't let him see that you didn't intend the real white thing by him. There may be more money in it if we run things through by ourselves; but there will be a heap less safety. You can bet your bottom dollar that he will begin to kick in just the hardest kind of style since he has seen your hand."

"Let him kick. When he gets to thinking things over he will see that he daren't take any one else in with him on the ground floor, if he wants to save himself; and as long as he plays a lone hand we have him where we want him. We crush him right now, and go on with the game. He can't get out of this without having one of the boys on his trail, and before the night is over I will see that they do him. We botched it here, and that's a fact; but luck won't save him twice. Now, gather yourself together, and help me out of this. The sooner I get behind the bar the better."

"He got you in hock, did he? I never knew how good a man he was before, and now that I do I feel the less like bucking against him. A man that can lay out Posey Peebles and Matt Hardy is too good for anything. But we are in the soup together, and sink or swim, of course I stay by you."

Matt had the strength to move by this time, and he made short work of the temporary bandages which confined the other. While he was undoing them he looked curiously at the man who could take such a disagreeable plight with such utter coolness. When the last knot was loosened Peebles rose up leisurely.

"If my ears don't deceive me there is a row at the Elk. You don't want to take any hand in, but just get back to your house as soon as you can. If the judge tried to make out that you and I are in the same boat, Hard Luck would laugh too much. See that no one is around, and light out the back way."

"But what am I to do?"

"Nothing at all until midnight; then, be here. Now that we have got to the bottom of him we know just what to do with the rest; which was what I was playing for. Before that time the boys will have downed him, and our way will be clear. So long, and don't exert yourself too much. It's bad for the digestion."

The two made their way along the passage through which the judge had lately departed, but met no one. Matt executed his retreat from the building unseen, while Posey entered the saloon alone; and there seemed to be an urgent demand for his presence there. As usual, wherever he went, the calico man had been getting into trouble.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WILD HORSE FINDS A PARD.

It took considerable self-denial for Matt Hardy to leave the Spotted Elk behind him, for, from

the noise that he heard, there was the liveliest kind of a time going on inside.

But the orders of Posey were imperative; and since the deposition of the judge, Matt felt bound to obey Posey as his superior officer. He shrugged his shoulders, knit his fists together, and then walked on.

"Let them shoot it out if they want to," he thought to himself. "Everything is going to the deuce. If I was sure he would do the square thing I would stick to the judge, anyhow. Posey would sell out his own brother, or cut his throat for a quarter. If the boys dared to go back on him they would do it fast enough, sooner than trust his oily tongue, and heart of stone. But the few who know him know that he is a holy terror, and act accordingly. Wonder if there is any chance of his going up the flume in there? Guess the devil will protect his own as usual; and no one will suspect what lies inside of that thick-looking head of his. A few more knock-outs will make a regular little lamb out of me. Wonder if I have lost my nerve for good and all. When there are two such bad men on different sides of the fence it's no wonder a fellow don't know which way he had better get down. It wouldn't be bad to be looking around for a landing place."

It was rather late in the day for Matt Hardy to show signs of repentance, but he was one of the kind who think that it is better late than never; and as yet he had not made up his mind which side he was to take; he was only considering.

Posey was not considering a bit. As he stepped through the doorway he gave a glance around, and then seized his "switch." This was a stout club, that he had wielded on more than one occasion to good advantage, when he had felt called upon to interfere, and assist his employees to clear out the house.

If he had expected to see anything of the judge he was mistaken. The head and front of the offending was Calico Dick. How the row had begun he could not guess, since he had cautioned Johnny Davis to do his best to prevent anything that might look like an attack on the man, in case he again put in his appearance.

It was only a chance that there had been any trouble at all. One of the men, who had gone into the lynching party in good faith the night before, had put in an appearance, with both eyes in mourning, and had started the fracas, which gradually included a number of others, and against them all Calico Dick held his own.

"It's a chance," muttered Posey, as he saw the head of the stranger almost within reaching distance.

"There has got to be a fight with the judge anyhow, and as the fellow seems to be his side pard it will be all the better if he is out of the road. He must have been laying off somewhere, nursing up. If he had been around asking questions about missing females to-day it might have made no end of trouble."

Posey had a neat little way of swinging his switch around underhanded to gather momentum; and he was swinging it now, as he stole toward the little knot that was swaying this way and that. With the odds against him it seemed as likely as not that the stranger would go over the range without his assistance; but Posey could not wait to see. The chance was too good to make it certain.

Just as he got the right swing to his stick there was an opening in the crowd, so that he could see the head of Calico Dick close at hand, in the right position for him to reach it. His hand came up, and he struck with all his might.

"Ef yer pleases, don't."

The caution was in a juvenile voice that Posey recognized, in spite of his preoccupation. At the same time a chair appeared to bob up from the floor of its own volition, and his wrist struck on its rail with a force that tore the club from his hand, and caused him to shake the injured member, until the blood flew in a little shower. He had broken the skin so deeply that it was like the cut of a knife.

"Now then, Dickey, it's about time ter travel, don't yer think?" continued Little Lum as he edged up alongside of the man from Rakestraw. "Whoop it up heavy fur a last grand clean-up; an' then hop lively. I got news; an' we better be travelin'."

Whether the words were heard or not it seemed as though Dick acted in obedience to them. He quit this line of defense, and began an attack that cleared the floor in no time, since he just rushed forward, striking as he went. Right and left, on this side and that he rained his blows, while Little Lum stuck close at his heels. In spite of two or three shots that were fired, the man from Rakestraw drew no weapon, but depended on his fists alone. When he burst out of the door the boy went with him.

"Leadin' 'em on, are yer? Want 'em ter think yer won't stay when the lead begins ter fly? An' some day when it's solid old bizz'ness they kin find out how big they was mistoken. But come erlong. Ther judge are a-waitin' fur ye, an' I got su'thin' ter tell ye both."

"For a small boy I should say you know a heap. I am with you. When the Wild Horse from Rakestraw runs away he does that like he does everything else—just as hard as he can.

He told me to keep things going there till he came back; and I think I made it so interesting that no one thought of going out to see any other man. But what do you know about the judge? Are you an old side pard of his? Because you look like a boy that would hate to wake up some morning and find himself in a snarl."

"Side pard nothin'. I'm on his track, tryin' ter git ther wrinkle ov what he's been up to; an' I think I ain't fur off ov knowin' ez much ez arybody. Old Handcart's ther on'y pard I hev; an' ef you hed stuck ter him las' night, reckon yer would 'a' found out more ner you'll git in ther Spotted Elk ef yer stayed thar fur a month."

The two were fitted to go together, for without a word on the subject, or a moment of lost time, they kept together, doubling around the saloon, and darting away finally in a direction that was really indicated by the boy.

"Blame his pictures!" exclaimed Lum, as he halted and looked around him.

"He said he would wait for me hyer; but I reckon he didn't mean that he would wait till I come back. He's gone now—an' he let on he wanted ter see yer pertick'ler like. Shell we hunt him up, with blood in our eyes, er shell you and I go somewhar an' hev a good, old-fashioned talk? Ef I knowed jest what yer game war I might tell yer w'ich it war ter be without askin'."

"I expect you could," responded the Wild Horse, dryly. "Especially if the judge would trust such an interesting young man as you are to find out. Of course he don't want to know; and there are no others in Hard Luck that would give a dime to know. Come, now. If you have anything to say speak it quick. If the man you call Handcart had not spoken of you last night I would think you were a little fraud, clean through."

"Know how you feel. Hev felt that way meself, more ner once. But I ain't keerin'. It don't hurt nobody half ez bad ez a club. I kin afford ter be open an' above board. I'm lookin' after Faith. An' ter do that I hev ter take in Magderlena. I hed my eye on ther judge because I knowed he hed his eye on her. But ther's a earthquake hit him hard, er a cyclone, er sn'thin' ter shake him on all-fours, an' turn him inside out. It ain't no use ter hurt yer opticks a-lookin' after him; it's ther rest ov ther gang that's runnin' ther machine; an' ef they don't lay him out fer fear he'll split it'll be a wonder."

"Come, come! What do I care for the gang, or the judge, either, as long as he behaves himself? What do you know about Magdalena?"

"That's whar I went off ther trigger. I don't know nothin'—comparably speakin'. Thought I war on ther track fur a minnit; an' then wouldn't drop off tell I seen what they war goin' ter do with ther wooman. I ain't jest sure, yer onderstands; but I got a idear thet mebbe they mou't all three be found in ther same place. Ef so I could locate 'em within a mile er rod, er tharabouts; an' ez I left Handcart a-explorin', p'raps he's hit it closter yet."

"Do you mean that you followed the fellows that carried off the woman from the neighborhood of what is known as Nibsey's shanty?"

"That's the lady, though ther seems ter be some doubt 'roun' town ef thar are sich a female woman. They take it mighty cool anyhow; an' ez thar's reason in all things I ain't bin sayin' much. Handcart sed I'd better hunt you up; but you warn't easy ter find. Are yer ready ter j'ine him; er are yer goin' ter take a young army under pay afore yer starts?"

"No army in mine. If what you tell me is the truth I am with you, and your obedient servant to boot. The ladies first. After that we can pick up the gang at our leisure. But do you really know where to look for the women?"

"Know whar ter look; but ain't so sure about seein' her. Ther's a big prospectus ov rock an' dirt, an' she's somewhar onderneath 'em. Ez fur ez I could see they took her down a hole an' then drawed ther hole in after 'em. That's what pard are lookin' fur."

"That is good enough. If this crowd is not scared they have had a hint to move slow that I guess they are sharp enough to take, and I can drop them while we look for that same hole in the ground. What's the matter now?"

Lum had turned suddenly away, with his revolver in his hand. Once he raised it, as though about to shoot, but lowered it again. It did not require the answer of the boy to tell Calico Dick that a man was stealing away in the darkness, and that it was possible he had been listening to the conversation.

"That's him; that's Kale Canyon, himself. Thought it war funny I hedn't seen him in town. He's took ther trick, an' are layin' low. Foller him, pard, foller him. He'll take us either ter ther hole in ther ground, er ter Faith, an' p'raps both."

"Or else to the judge. I have an idea that perhaps he wants to see him before he goes any further. But we will follow him, anyhow. Don't fear but what he will come into the final settlement. I feel like shooting him myself; but there is a chance that he can help us more alive

than dead. No more talk now, until we get him in view once more."

Silently they stole away in the direction taken by Kanyon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT KALE KANYON HAD BEEN DOING.

"Who calls for Faith? Where is Faith? And who is she? I once knew a Faith—can it be she? Oh, I hope not!"

So Hiram Hurd's wife had moaned in answer to the voice that addressed her, and for a little while there was no response. The strange voice had been something of a shock to the first questioner, and she said no more.

Then the woman rose up and dragged herself toward the other—who was Magdalena.

The young woman was but now waking from her drugged sleep in which she had been carried away from the Traveler's Home; and her words had been the first effort of reviving intelligence. When she saw the feminine form bending over her she only shuddered and remained quiet. By instinct she knew that there had been some treachery afloat, and fancied that this was the landlady of the Home.

"Speak!" urged the elder woman.

"Who is Faith? It would only need the knowledge that it was Faith Ammersly you meant, to make me altogether wretched."

"And Faith Ammersly it was that I called for—who are you?"

"I am a prisoner here, like yourself, if I mistake not. Be merciful and tell me all that you know. What has become of her? What is the worst that you know?"

"I know nothing. We lay down together; and must have slept, though we did not mean to until we saw her father. Now, I am here; how did I get here, and where is she?"

They were both weak and excited, and too suspicious of everything to at first trust each other with the truth. For a little while they remained silently staring with large eyes. Then the elder broke the seeming spell.

"I am Faith Ammersly's mother. Now tell me all."

"Then, whose wife are you?" asked Magdalena, still somewhat suspicious. How could she tell what scheme was afloat; and how much her unguarded words might aid it.

"I understand you," answered Diana.

"The man whose wife I was is now known as Hiram Hurd; though once he bore the name of Ammersly. It was but this very night that Faith's father told me that she was in safety and far enough away; though I warned him of the danger she might be in. Where is she now? What has happened? Delay no longer, but tell me all the truth. I have been nigh to death, but this thing has made me strong. Perhaps I can yet save her. If needs be, the thousands shall be sacrificed. What is wealth to her safety? And her father can care for her, as I know; if he too escapes."

While she was speaking Magdalena had time to think; and the result was that she felt certain that there could be no deception about this. Strange as it seemed she had come across the mother of Little Faith. If the child still lived, and she met her again, she would have something strange to tell her. Without further hesitation she gave all the story of Faith's adventures as she knew them; winding up with their lying down to rest at the Traveler's Home, while waiting for the supper they so badly needed. After that it was all a blank, till she awakened here.

"But if this be all of the story, how does it come that they brought you here? What could they want of you; and what have they done with Faith?"

"Perhaps they did not wish to run the risk of having me talk, as I assuredly would have done had I been left behind. It is not likely that they will do any harm to me beyond keeping me a prisoner for a few days. If they do, Ad—my father will be heard from. He cannot but suspect who it is that has a hand in this; and though he would never betray a man who was his partner in other matters unless that man was false to him, in a case like this he would prove a doubly dangerous foe. It is for Faith that I am uneasy; not myself. I have not known her long, but I have learned to love her."

"And you have no idea where we are?"

"Not a particle, except that I think we are no longer in the town."

"That I know, myself. I did not become unconscious until some time after we had left the village. But in whose hands are we? What sort of men are they?"

"I am afraid I know only too well. If I have made no mistake in reasoning from what I have seen and heard, they belong to a band that is large in numbers, and is fit for any grade of crime. Some of its members have robbed, and some murdered. Some have made counterfeit money, and others passed it. Ask me no more questions. It makes me sick to answer them."

They talked in a low tone, so that it would have been hard for their words to have been

overheard. As the girl spoke of the band she shivered, and buried her face in her hands. She had not exactly told all; when she thought of the possible fate of Faith she could say no more.

Faith's mother seemed the stronger of the two—in nerve, at least. She no longer trembled, and when she arose to her feet her step did not falter. With her daughter in danger there was something to be done. If it was possible, an escape must be made from this place; not so much on her own account as on that of Faith. Once back in Hard Luck and she would hide and falter no more. She would find Hiram Hurd, and stand by him in the rescue of their daughter. If her brother stood in the way—after this she would not spare him.

It was not hard to see that they were under ground. The small room that confined them had but one apparent outlet; and that was unguarded. She decided to see where it led to, and advanced boldly along the narrow passage.

Before she had gone half a dozen paces she heard rough voices talking, not far beyond. Probably the speaker was a new arrival, for he was expressing his dissatisfaction with some one or something in terms that were more forcible than polite.

"Don't get excited, Kale," answered a more pleasant voice.

"You don't own the whole earth from the ground up; and if you do you can spare a corner for common folks, like the boss, to dump their dunnage in. Your girl hasn't moved a finger yet; and if I was you I would begin to be thinkin' she never will. The other party is not very lively, either, and if she don't die afore morning I should wonder. Take it easy, and be glad and thankful that there is no one here to call your checks in for going into an outside speculation when there was real business afloat."

A few bitter words Kale Canyon flung back for answer, and then he passed into the tunnel-like avenue in which Mrs. Ammersly was standing.

With some desperate but not very clear idea in her head she threw herself down, and hugged tightly the right-hand wall of the passage. It was natural that Kale should keep to the other side; and it was possible that he would pass her without notice.

Though it was hard to tell what advantage it was to be to her, the movement was successful. As he entered the little room he looked sharply around.

There was no one there but Magdalena.

"Curse them," he grumbled. "It was their joke was it? Some day they will find that there's mighty little fun, joking, with Kale Canyon. She sleeps like a log but I guess it's all right. The madame knows what she is about when she gives her little doses, and it didn't look as though she meant any big damage. Wish I could get her awake; but there's nothing to do but to wait till the drug wears off."

Magdalena had stretched herself out at full length, and was simulating deep sleep with wonderful success. She did not care to talk with Kale Canyon just then; and she knew that if she once opened her eyes on him she would have to talk. Perhaps, by feigning slumber, she might learn something of what had befallen Faith.

Her ruse completely deceived him. He looked at her a little, and then spoke aloud.

"Lie there, pretty. After what I've done I guess there is no one going to interfere with me, and my game. It's just as well you sleep for the present. By the time you wake up I will be ready to talk; and you will be readier to listen to reason. You are mine, all mine. If they don't like it let them try to put Kale Canyon out."

The fellow had been lately drinking; but not so heavily that he did not know clearly what he was about. He had only looked in to see that his prisoner was as secure and safe as when he left her; and then could not resist the opportunity for a trifle of soliloquy. He turned away again, when he had said just enough to alarm Magdalena, without giving her any definite information, and returned to his associates.

"What was that you were giving me?" he asked as he re-entered the larger apartment, where three men sat by the side of a little fire, smoking their pipes.

"The little daisy is lying there just as I left her, and she's all alone. Some day you will try your jokes once too often, and get your head cracked."

"Don't be a fool, Kale. I have heard of men drunk enough to see double; but you seem to have only got far enough along the road to see half. Or have you only eyes for the daisy, as you call her?"

"I can see as much as the next man, when it comes to that; and I'll swear there's no one else in the den. If you don't believe me go and look for yourself."

"I will and show you, too. After that you and I may have a settlement. You never come in but what you put on your infernal airs. Come along, now; or else own up, right here, how you have been lying."

"Come along goes; and if there's anything in what you were giving me perhaps there will be some one else up at the captain's office for settlement. If you have let that woman you talk about, get past all three of you, you ain't fit to lead blind monkeys to water."

Kale began to see that the man was in earnest; and he was just as certain that Magdalena was the only occupant of the room he had lately left.

A step or two and a glance was all that was needed to show that Kale had made no mistake. Magdalena still lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily; but the other prisoner was no longer there. Nor was she in the narrow passage. Kale might have missed her, both going and coming; but when the two swept through it, side by side, there was no chance that they had stepped by, or over her. Where had she gone to?

CHAPTER XXVII.

ADAM GURLEY TAKES A HAND.

THE escape of Calico Dick and the judge scarcely angered Posey Peebles as much as did the way he had been foiled. Twice, now, and within a few minutes, had he been thwarted, and each time by a boy. If Posey ever allowed himself such a luxury he would have really been in a towering passion. Perhaps that would not have been as dangerous as the way he accepted the situation.

"The boy has a cast-steel nerve to trust himself in here, after the affair down-stairs. He ought to know that he is as good as a dead boy, anyhow, but that the longer he keeps out of our sight, the longer he will keep on drawing breath. He must have come from the judge; and that shows that there is a plan to sell us out. It is time for something more than talk and failure. If these hounds that have been taking share and share alike with men that were doing the work, don't make their teeth meet in something soon, I will feel like selling them out myself. It looks as though the fingers of every last son of them had been greased from the way everybody slips through. Hiram cannot be found; the calico man cleans up the place and goes away unmolested; and same way with the judge and this boy. For half a cent I would close up, and go out on the trail myself, until I downed them all. Pity that I let Matt go, after all."

That was about what he was saying to himself; and yet he was beaming fatly on his customers, not a line of trouble showing on his unctuous face as he lapsed back into his regular seat, in the great arm-chair.

As he settled himself comfortably back, a man came in through the front door, and made a motion to indicate that he had something for his private ear. The man was Kale Canyon, whom he had not as yet seen since his arrival at Hard Luck.

The appeal was a little too much for Posey, who did not intend to break up his peace and comfort. By another sign, imperceptible to every one else, he indicated that Kale should come to him; and yet he frowned darkly as he saw the ruffian swagger over the floor.

But men came and went at the Spotted Elk, and no one not concerned took any account of them.

Kale was in a little better humor than Peebles.

"Say, what's this they have been giving me about the boss? Has he flunked? Out there they are whispering that he is going to give the whole gang away. If it's so I want to know it quick. I've got some of his money in my pocket; but I ought to have more before the night is over."

"Never you mind about the boss; you just keep on with your own work, and we will see that everything else goes right. If you know what is good for you, you will get out of here, and stay out."

"Guess you would as soon I was somewhere I couldn't come; but Kale Canyon is taking good care of himself, and don't you disremember. I came in, one for myself and half a dozen for you. A pretty gang you have out there. They have let that woman get away from them, and hadn't the sand to come and tell you of it. Strikes me everything is going to blaze; and if you don't have something to propose I'm going to pull out."

This time Posey did feel a sensation—and yet he simply winked slowly, and rubbed his fat knuckles. Kale almost thought that he had brought no news after all; but after a little Peebles spoke:

"If that is the case don't you think that you had better be hunting for her? I don't know that it makes much difference to me, but if she should strike a man by the name of Hiram Hurd he might take a crowd and go to investigate. Wouldn't wonder if they hung the whole lot if they came across you. If they didn't they ought to. Keep away from here until she is found or I will do something of the kind myself. Perhaps I will be out there later on to see how things have been going. If it's not all square somebody will be wiped out."

"Better not let the galoots know that or they will cut stick and no mistake. They have been

scattered around on the hunt all day, but there isn't a sign of her. Mysterious—unless Posey Peebles stole her away while they slept. I'm not afraid of you, Posey, and say just what I mean."

"Nothing like it, my boy; nothing like it. But that kind 'most always, sometimes don't live long. We need you, Kale; and you are too good a man to go out of the dump just now, so that I feel like a little advice. Keep your eyes open. There may be some one hunting you; and when you are found you won't have the ghost of a show. That might have suited my hand well enough a day or so ago; but just now, if you listen to reason I want you, and give you the warning. The boss was to give you five hundred for a little job, that I know you slipped up on. I have two or three little jobs, and will guarantee the same price for any of them. The money may come out of the treasury; but that is neither here nor there. Would you like to undertake them?"

"No woman killing in mine; I've had enough of that."

"No. Only men. There is Hiram, for instance. And a detective that calls himself the Wild Horse from Rakestraw. And there is the judge. We are not sure about him; but it's pretty likely that he is the worst card in the deck. After that, if you have any time to hunt him up, there is a small boy that looks as though he would be very much in the way."

"Little Lum for a dollar!"

"He's a stranger to me; but he has been very much around. He was here not long ago. Now, go; and think it all over. Do your duty as far as you can, and don't think of skipping. I should be compelled to hunt you up myself; and when I take that trouble once I never have it over again. Sabbe?"

"Well enough," growled Kale, as he turned away. Somehow he did not feel half as courageous about facing Posey as he did when he entered.

When he came out he hardly thought that two of the parties mentioned by Posey were watching him, and that they dropped in his rear like a pair of shadows, fully bent on seeing where he went to.

"He's bin in talkin' ter Posey, an' I'll bet yer hez his orders. Now we want ter see whar he goes to; an' then I bet we have 'em all in a box."

Lum was delighted with the prospect, but the Wild Horse was not so sure. He shook his head and held up his finger warningly.

"Don't be too certain. Kale is a double-faced villain, that plays his own game, if it kills his partner. There may be a hitch yet. Keep a sharp eye out that he don't get away from both of us; and for the rest, hold that tongue of yours a little tighter. It's good what's of it but there's plenty of it such as it is. I begin to think that you are not such a great scout as you say. Old Handcart didn't have half as much to say."

"An' both ov yer looked 'round all night without findin' nothin'. I'm dumb ez a clam hereafter; and you'll see whar you'll land too when yer loses my valur'ble suggistions."

Lum drew himself up with an air of injured innocence, ceased his whispers, and began to edge away from his companion. It was not certain whether he was merely getting out of the range of temptation; or whether he was going to drop the trail altogether. Whichever it was Calico Dick paid no further attention to him, but kept his eyes fixed on Canyon, who was so far ahead that a little oversight might result in losing him in the darkness.

Of course he knew that he was in danger himself. He knew something of the league that existed in Hard Luck; and was sure that his death or capture was by this time an object of desire by its leaders, and probably the majority of its members. An assassin might spring up any step. They had been given ample time to prepare for any evil game; though he hoped that the strange change in the judge might have thrown them into confusion, without actually scaring them from the field. Of all this he took his chances, and went on in the dark with as much unconcern as though he had not come nigh to his death only the night before. And Hard Luck was apt to repeat itself in such things.

Kale went to several places—saloons for the most part—and did not stay long in any of them. Finally he struck out as though he had taken his actual direction, and the calico man watched him closer than ever. He was not prepared for what happened.

There suddenly sounded behind him the noise of light footsteps, and a man passed him at full speed, without giving a glance in his direction. In a moment he overtook Kale, flung himself upon him, and had a gripe on his throat before that individual thought of danger.

"Curse you, Kale Canyon," he hissed into the ear of the only half struggling man.

"Where is Magdalena? What have you done with her? Speak quickly or I will tear you all apart!"

As he uttered the words Calico Dick was just at his shoulder, and he heard them as plainly as the one to whom they were uttered. They made him shrink back a little and listen eagerly. Here was yet another on the same quest; and he was in deadly earnest. Would it be better to leave

Kale in his hands, or interfere before he crushed the life out of the man in what was evidently a mad rage?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRANGE MEETINGS.

ONLY an angry gurgle came from the throat of Kale Canyon. The pressure was altogether too strong for anything audible, as the assailant seemed to recognize. By this time he had gathered Kale's wrists together in one hand; and throwing him heavily to the ground he put his knee on his chest, and then removed the clutch on the windpipe which had pretty nearly advanced to strangulation pitch.

"Did you think that I was trusting the girl to your tender mercies? I had my eyes on you until you reached Hard Luck; but here you gave me the slip, just when I thought she was safe; and you got in your work. If she is dead I'll kill you without mercy, no matter what it costs. If she is living and unharmed, lead me to her. After that you can have satisfaction if you want it—or revenge, if you can get it."

"Let up, Adam Gurley, if you dare. I'll make you smart for this. What do you mean? What do I know about your Magdalena? Go ask the boss; and if he won't answer, speak to Posey Peebles. The gang is all going up; and I'm going to pull out to-night."

"What you want to do, and what you are going to do are two different things. You would sell out your friends fast enough if you could, but no chance of that will there be for you this night. You take me straight to Magdalena—or you die."

"And much good that last would do either of you," sneered Kale, somewhat recovered.

"If I knew where the girl was—which I don't—you wouldn't find her any sooner by letting a couple inches of that blade into my chest. Be a fool if you want to, but don't be three or four of 'em rolled into one. I tell you, I know nothing of her, or the kid. They beat me to town, and then vanished. It's been kept mighty quiet, but there were a dozen looking for them to-day, and that's the reason I say Posey had a hand in it. When he hides it's hard to find. I was just in, trying to pump him a little. S'pose you go try your hand on him?"

Kale was as cool now as the coolest, and was hiding his anger and anxiety with success; but all the time he waited for a chance; and he thought he had it now. Gurley had handled him like a child, but he did not think it could have been done if he had not been taken unawares. When he imagined he felt a slight relaxation of the grip on his wrists he suddenly made a violent effort to fling the man off of him. With a quick movement he drew his legs under him as well as he could, and then kicked upward, at the same time wrenching his arms to one side.

For all the good it did he might as well have remained quiet. He never even shook Gurley, who did not appear to exert a particle of extra strength to resist the attempt.

"No, Kale, it won't do. All the lies you can utter will not deceive me for a moment. I know that the little one was gone when you got there, but Magdalena was left. If a dozen were looking for them to-day I wonder they didn't ask their questions from the housetops. If the truth were known, all Hard Luck would be out after them, and by this time some one would have found the scent. I am a stranger here; but I know that all do not nod as the judge winks."

"Bet your life on that," answered Kale, once more cool as he noted that Gurley's tone had not changed a particle.

"The goody-good sort of people don't want him; and the rest won't have him. He's below par just now, all around; and if you went too confidingly into his arms I reckon you could count sure that you were putting your neck into a noose. Now then, you let up, or kill me, just as you please. I have told you all that I know, and if you don't believe me, so much the worse. It's all I have to say, or all I am going to, either."

"Kill you it is, then," responded Gurley, who if cooler was as deadly as ever.

"Tell me the truth about Magdalena, or you die."

"I have told you all I know; kill me if you dare," was Kale's reply. He stuck closer to his lie than he would have done to a truth; and never quivered when Adam raised his blade.

Whether he intended to execute his threat it would only be guess-work to say. An interruption came, which led Gurley to look up with a sudden start. A light hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Do not kill him, it will do no good. I have seen Magdalena, and she is so far safe. If you can rid yourself of him, perhaps I can tell you how to find her, though it would not be safe for you to attempt it alone. There are others watching her who are as bad as he is."

So the woman who whispered in his ear was saying, and all the time Gurley was looking at her in a wondering sort of way, without understanding a word after that first sentence.

"Who are you?" he said, apparently forgetting the man under his hands, and slowly rising with his hands turned as though to grasp her.

It was not likely that Kale would overlook the opportunity, though he waited until he was certain that it was there. He gathered himself slowly together at the moment that Gurley rose; and then, with a lightning-like bound was on his feet, snatching a knife from its place of concealment in his bosom.

"Die, Adam Gurley!" he hissed, with a fierce thrust at the back of the man.

The stroke would have been fatal, and the threat no doubt have turned into a shout of triumph, had there not been an interruption which made it an exclamation of dismay. Up from the ground in turn darted a little figure, and a stick was deftly swung to catch the descending blade.

"Don't be too certain ov a rank sure thing. Little Lum hez ther fakilty an' all ther perfessors ov bein' on hand ter-night. Hold up yer hands once more!"

Unfortunately Lum was bothered a little with the stick. It only took an instant of time to drop it and grasp for his revolver; but in that Kale had taken care of himself in a way that was unexpectedly rapid. He leaped forward, dodged to the right, and then settled into a run which took him out of sight before the boy could make up his mind to fire.

"There!" he said in dismay, as the fellow vanished. "That comes of yer mercy. 'He's gone fur good.'"

"Hush!" said Calico Dick.

"Did you not hear whatshe was saying? We have made a good exchange, if I mistake not. Quiet, will you, and listen!"

Gurley never noted the flight of his intended victim, but stood quivering like a leaf.

"Do the dead come back?" was what he said at last, as he bent closer, and peered into the woman's face.

"Not the dead, perhaps; but those sometimes do who are still living. You can see that I am here—is it a pleasant surprise?"

"Heaven knows that it is," replied Adam, with an earnestness that could not be doubted.

"Day and night, waking or dreaming, I have always seen you since—you know when. But it was not like this. You were always white, and cold, and stiff, with a red splotch on your breast. I never dreamed, though, that there would come a blissful time, when I should see you again, and not like that. Ah, his power over me is gone now; and I am my own man again."

"Don't be so certain about that, for I doubt not there are other memories to take the place of that one. Best get far away from here before you see him again. And Magdalena! Will you take her with you, too?"

"Magdalena! I had forgotten. I must find her. That villain knew where she was, and I have let him escape."

"That matters not. By yourself you could never get her out of the hands that held her. If it is to be done by force, it would take an army. You can find others to help you, and I can tell you where she is confined, and assure you that so far she is safe, and is likely to remain so. Whatever that villain's intentions may be, those of the others are simply to protect themselves from harm; and if they were assured that they could do it in safety to themselves, they would gladly turn her adrift. They may do it yet when they shift for themselves, as I know they are in trouble over my escape."

"So much the worse, so much the worse. While she is with them, she is safe enough—if she is with others of the band to which he belongs. It is only that one man she has cause to fear. Yet she is a brave girl, and may be able to take care of herself whatever he may try. If you have forgiven, and need my services, they are yours first. After that I will look after Magdalena."

"Very well. Find for me, first of all, the man known here as Hiram Hurd. I must see him at once."

"I can look for him, though I do not know that I can find him. There are but few men of Hard Luck whom I have ever seen—he is a stranger to me. Those I know will scarcely be ready to aid me."

"Excuse me, madame," said the calico man, who had drawn back a pace or two during the conversation, so that he might hear with less likelihood of being seen.

"Hiram seems to be as badly missing as the lost arts they talk about. As I have what might be called a friendly interest in him, perhaps you could not do better than confide in me, too, and allow me to assist you."

"Clarence Maycroft!" exclaimed Gurley, without looking up. "Are you here, too? Do your worst."

CHAPTER XXIX.

CALICO DICK RISES TO EXPLAIN.

"THAT name will do as well as any other, since you have spoken it; but I would just as soon that it had not been mentioned. Around

here I have been trying to establish my identity as Calico Dick; and as no one had anything better to go on, I guess I was succeeding fairly well. Perhaps you begin to suspect that you did an injudicious thing when you threw yourself into the arms of the Posey Peebles crowd, and ran away before you found out whether I meant you harm or good? It has been uncomfortable enough for you; and more than bad for Magdalena."

"What do you mean? It is no child's play that is meant when you get on the trail of a man—and did I not find you on the trail that led to me? But for that, Magdalena and I would never have been here. Certainly she would have not been brought into all this deadly risk."

"And there is just where you missed it, as you would have found if you had waited. I knew your history even better than you did; and had no idea of working you harm so long as you were true to the girl. If I could have spared the time I might have convinced you so, too. But as it was, I thought it might be as well for you to drift toward Hard Luck, since I was going there myself."

Hiram Hurd's wife listened impatiently. All these explanations, at this rate, would take time; and time was the one thing she was not certain she had to spare.

"Talk of this again; this is no place for your confidences. Do you not think that the rascal who ran away will tell all he has seen and heard? While we are wasting precious moments, what is becoming of my girl; and what may not be happening to that other girl you speak of? If it be so that Hiram Hurd is missing I can well believe that it is because something has happened to him; and I am afraid I know only too well who it was that directed the blow. He is not dead yet—he cannot be dead. I will make one more effort with him whom I feel sure is at the head of the plot. It may save bloodshed; and it must save Faith. Oh, if I but knew where to find him!"

"Sorry, madame; but that does not seem to be the easiest task, either. There is something of a mystery about the judge, and it is uncertain what he is going to do; but his friends seem to think that he intends to do them, at any rate, and they are prepared to act accordingly. You are aware that they are a shady lot; and one can hardly blame him for playing hide and seek a little, until he gets the measure of the gang under the new conditions. He and I seem to be able to work on the same level just now; and I am looking for him myself. There is just one question. It was supposed that Magdalena, and the girl named Faith, were somewhere together. Can you tell me whether it is so or not?"

"I can tell you that it is not so. At least, she told me when I saw her that she knew nothing of the whereabouts of my daughter. If she was taken at the same time they are surely not together now."

"That settles it, then. We are once more all at sea. If Ewing could only get back his memory without losing his conscience, what a help he could be."

"I do not understand you. You talk as though something had happened to him—to the man you call Judge Ewing. What was it? Or is it simply that he has drawn away from his associates, and intends to make a man of himself in very truth. Speak! It is of more interest to me than you can imagine."

"Imagination don't have a very prominent part in my affairs; but if you say knowledge, then I can tell you where you are away off. I know the gentleman as thoroughly as though I had been his bosom friend for years; and yet I haven't seen him very often, either. And as you are unfortunately a relative with the same lady for mother, and have followed his fortunes from pillar to post for a number of years, you can understand what all that means."

"Only too well. Only too well," murmured the woman, shrinking back a little in spite of herself at this announcement. She was not sure that this man was as much her friend as he tried to appear.

"Sorry to have to say it; but truth is mighty, and I have to tell a good deal of it. The fact about him is that last night when I came on the ground he had things almost arranged for immediate business, and I was hardly ready for it. I took the chances to get a little delay, and dropped him with a crease along the top of his head. Thought it might throw him off for a few hours, and then it would be too late for him to go ahead with his frolic for the night. He dropped sure enough; and came around again in due course of time; but when he returned from his spiritual absence he came back with a number of hanks dropped by the wayside. In fact, as I understand it, he has forgotten everything that has happened in the last thirteen years, or so; and don't propose to trouble himself about the hiatus. He knocked down some of his ardent friends, and proceeded to try to upset his own plans as far as he happened to run into them. Unfortunately, he could not remember anything of the game that his own head had set up, so that he couldn't be as effective as he would have liked to have been; but he was doing fairly well at last accounts."

"If this be true—if this be true! Yet why then is Faith missing? Was it before they carried me off that this thing happened; if not why have I been a prisoner?"

"On general principles I should say that the judge had started the avalanche and it kept on going of its own momentum. At present the avalanche is composed of Posey Peebles and the gang. If Ewing don't stand from under they will do their best to crush him. They know what he expected to make out of the conspiracy, and they intend to gather in quite as large an amount, if not precisely in the same way. Between you and me, if I was in your place, I am not sure but that I would sooner be in their hands as they are than in those of the judge as they were. But for Hiram, I don't think it will make any difference. My own opinion about him at present is that he is out in the "Great Expectations," waiting for them to open the ball. I have heard that Posey had his eye on a little pile of nuggets Hiram has caught, said to be worth a hundred thousand. The attack there was not to be made until to-night, and as like as not this trouble of the judge's will postpone that for a night or so. That will be all downright red business; but the gang could make more out of your daughter living than dead, and wouldn't be apt to harm you unless they found that there was no wealth in the scheme, and it was necessary to get rid of you for the sake of the safety of all parties concerned. That covers the whole ground, and the finer points will keep, if you don't see them just as they are. Now that we have you we want to keep you. They will either have to turn Faith loose, or leave town themselves. When they began to dicker they would otherwise find it too everlasting hot to suit. By the way, that girl of yours—hired girl I mean, of course—was bought over by the enemy, if she didn't come out of their lines in the first place. You couldn't find her the other night after Hiram had left because she had skipped the ranch; and I heard of her to-day, on top of the stage, and bound for Way Back. Nibsey might make it uncomfortable if you undertook to occupy that shanty again, so that you had better go along to the Metropolitan. I will see that you are safe there, and will keep up the look-out for the missing men and the girls. You will hear from them before the night is over, I am sure."

She made no objection to this proposition. Indeed, the conference had already lasted too long both for prudential reasons, and on account of her waning strength. It was Adam Gurley who seemed to doubt what he should do next; and he expressed himself on the subject in a hesitating sort of a way, as though uncertain whether his standing allowed him the right to ask questions.

"Oh, you and the boy can wait here for me if you feel like it; or go along, if that suits you any better. You might be a worse man if you tried, and I would just as soon you took a fresh start, and made the right entries at the top of the new leaf. It will be worth your while to help my game; to say nothing of the fact that I am going to look after Magdalena."

"I will wait for you here, then, unless I can see that villain again. If I do, my eyes shall not leave him until he has shown me where to find my daughter."

"All right! If you see Kale, go for him. If not, wait till I join you. We can work together to the profit of both of us as long as you are on the square; and the fact is, that will be about the only way for you to see a road out. But keep your eyes open. It's as like as not that some one has had an eye on this confab, and there may be danger when you don't expect it."

With the woman leaning heavily on his arm Calico Dick—or Clarence Maycroft, as he had better be hereafter called—started for the Metropolitan, leaving Gurley and the boy to their own devices.

"Blame it! Seems ter me he thinks he's boss ov ther hull shebang, and we hev ter wait fur him ter whissel afore we dare wink."

"Let him have his own way of doing things; he always has the right one," responded Gurley. "It gives me a chance to thank you for my life."

"Don't menshun it; it's no account, nohow. Jest what I bin a-doin' all my life, an' there thanks I got jin'rally wouldn't sell fur a lead quarter with a hole in it. Better go look after Faith. She's still missin'."

"You may, if you want to, but I shall wait for the detective."

"Detective, are he? Glad yer told me, er I wouldn't hev knowed it. I can't see he's detectin' much. Ef Old Handcart an' me hed ther same 'vantages we'd 'a' hed ther hull b'ilin' ov 'em in a box long afore this. An' ef he an' I git tergether ag'in think we'll hev ter do suthin' ov ther kind. But Faith's a-waitin'; guess I'll go find her fu'st. Ef she ain't out in ther country, an' ther lady sez not, maybe she's in town. It'll pay ter look ther place over, anyhow. So long! Give my regards ter the man in ther calico shirt, an' tell him I couldn't wait."

And with a shake of his head and a wave of his hand Lum passed on, leaving Adam Gurley to possess his soul with patience, and await the coming of the man from Rakestraw.

CHAPTER XXX.

FAITH MAKES A PROMISE.

FAITH, being young and healthy, and having had some strange experience already, was not particularly bewildered when she woke up and found herself alone, in a strange room, even if the place did have a close, underground smell, and the lamp burned with a dimness suggesting that the stock of oxygen was none too fresh. She raised herself on her elbow, looked around, and softly called for Magdalena.

Of course Magdalena was not there. It was about the time that young lady was making her confidences to Hiram Hurd's wife in a place similar in appearance, but a mile or more away.

"I have hardly got back to Little Lum and his cave," she said to herself, when there was no answer to her call, and she had taken in her surroundings.

"It looks a good deal more as though I was a prisoner here, and that if my friends don't come to me soon, all that I was afraid of would happen. I wonder if I am going to cry."

There was something of a choking in her throat, in spite of the way she was trying to keep up her courage; while the smile that she gave at her poor little jest was an exceedingly wan one. Still, she drew something of comfort from the fact that she was a prisoner.

"If they meant to kill me they would hardly have gone to the trouble of bringing me here," she thought. "They would have done their worst while I was still asleep. I will not cry; but I will look out for a chance to get away; and if I can find that, I will wait bravely. Father must have heard of my being here by this time; and if he is well, as Handcart and the boy seemed to believe, he will look me up, I don't care where they have me hidden."

Comforting herself in this way, as well as she could, she quietly laid down again, and closed her eyes, only sure of being very hungry and very miserable.

An hour or two elapsed before she heard a single sound of any kind. Then there was the click of the bolt in the lock of the heavy door, and she could feel rather than see that some one was regarding her with attention.

As Faith had no such reason as Magdalena for avoiding an interview, and was willing to have two or three for the sake of something to eat, she did not attempt to disguise the fact that she was wide awake, but started up at once. Looking in the direction of the late sound, she saw that she was being attentively surveyed by a man whose face was covered with a mask, and who wore a cloak. If she had not been suspicious of appearances she would have declared that he was a Mexican.

"Good-day, sir," she said, as coolly as she could, feeling her courage rising for the emergency.

"I hope you are bringing me my breakfast. I feel terribly in need of it; and if I don't have it soon I shall certainly starve."

"Ah, breakfast? Thou art certainly a brave girl if thou hast kept thy appetite. What shall it be? When they are to swing off a man they give him his choice the meal before; why should we not do the same for thee since thy time on earth is short?"

"I don't care much what it is, so that it is something good. And I am not a bit afraid of you now. You will take care that you don't run your own head in that rope you talk of. There were plenty of people who saw me coming into town, and when Lum and my father begin asking for me they can tell them which way we went. Then, when they get on the trail you will be glad to drop me and run. But if you want me to talk, you must get me something to eat first."

"Thy father may be dead by this time, and the boy have forgotten thee. It would be well for thee to be less smart. When Manuel takes thee in hand for the sake of revenge he remembers not the small boy, and he fears not the father. Yet money is better than blood, and for the sake of that, the breakfast thou askest for shall be ready in a brief time, and as thou eatest thou canst talk, and we will come to some understanding; for, until it is certain that thou hast no value it will be worth while to handle thee somewhat tenderly. After that—thy life will be worth but little."

"Why then take it?" called the girl after the intruder, but there was no answer. By that time he was gone, with the lock again clicking behind him.

"It looks to me as though there was not so much danger, after all. If I am for sale, father will buy me if he can do no better; and there is nothing to be gained by being afraid—though if I cried right loud I might bring Little Lum to me once more. I will wait a little, though, and see if he will not come without that. This time he is looking for me, anyhow; and his eyes are very sharp."

Keeping up her courage after this fashion the girl had not long to wait, for soon the man returned with a plate and a jug. The plate was pretty well heaped with bread and meat, and there was water in the jug. He locked the door after him, and set down plate and jug by the side of the girl.

"Fall to, if thou art so hungry; and between times thou canst answer my questions. Dost thou remember thy mother?"

The question was so unexpected that it nearly upset the child. She gulped a mouthful, and took a swallow from the jug before she answered.

"Perhaps; but it was a long time ago that she died."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man. "A long time ago it was, truly thousands of years ago, perhaps; but since thou wert born she has not died at all. She liveth even yet; and if I mistake not, very anxious is she to see thee."

"It is not true!" answered Faith sharply, having recovered her self-control, somewhat. "I remember well enough when she died, long ago though it was; and you are very cruel to talk to me so about it."

"A pleasant thing it is to be cruel; and if she be dead so long, the more reason that she be yearning to see thee now. But I meant not that, since she is still in the flesh, and it was but a brief time ago that I saw her. Last long she may not; but while she liveth, great consolation would it be to hold in her arms the daughter from whom so long has she been parted. That she gave thee up was no fault of hers; but rather a choice between two evils, of which that seemed to be by far the smallest. But eat thy meal. It may be some time before thou hast the chance for another."

It was hard to follow this last advice; but the girl tried her best to do so, answering never a word. She did not believe this masked stranger anyhow, though the raking up of such reminiscences was hard to bear.

"Thou hast doubts of all this. Perhaps it is no wonder. It can be proved to thee if it should seem worth while. Wouldst thou be glad or sorry to know that thy mother still lived?"

A little cry came from the lips of the tortured girl.

"What do you mean? Why do you torment me like this? I am only a child; is it like a man to say such things to me for the sake of seeing me weep? Let me alone, or some day it may be the worse for you."

"Thou art mistaken. It is not to torture thee, though small reason have I to love the man known here as Hiram Hurd—or any of his brood. It is only to see in how far I can have thy help that I ask thee these things. Thy life may depend upon what answer I hear, so, speak carefully as if thou wert standing in the face of death. Either this plan of mine, which shall net both revenge and gold, shall prove a success, or death must come—to one of us. Answer the question then, so that I may know how far these things may have an influence with thee."

"What is there to answer? What child would not give life itself to see the mother that she thought in the grave? And what revenge would be more wicked than to raise the hopes of that child, and then laugh at her for believing. I begin to believe you are worse than any other worst. Perhaps some day I will want to have revenge myself—and get it. When the chance comes I will have no mercy, either."

"When the time comes—all right. If thou canst ever come to that time make the most of it. It will be thy opportunity as this is mine. Thou hast answered well. It was to be certain that the memory of that mother was still dear to thee, and that thou wouldst do thy best to save her as well as thyself, that I asked thee. Wilt thou plead for her with thy father as it seems thou wouldst plead with me? Swear to do it, and thou shalt have the chance."

She doubted no longer. There was reason in all this beyond savage torture. She raised her hand and said solemnly, "I swear."

CHAPTER XXXI.

LEFT ALONE.

THE child was growing into a woman fast; and her few words were spoken as only a woman who recognized their importance could speak them. The man listened, heard, and was satisfied.

"Then try your best to win thy father to thy way of thinking, since if he come not that way both of ye die."

Faith had lost her appetite by this time beyond the power of present recovery. She could only wait anxiously for whatever might come next. When the man turned again toward the door she clasped her hands and in vain struggled to suppress a cry, though it was hard to tell whether she was most glad or dismayed. If her father was there she would no longer be alone; but then it meant danger for them both, no doubt.

She continued in her anxious expectancy for at least five minutes before she had any relief. Then, the door opened; and this time some one else was on the threshold, and as she looked keenly at him she gave a cry of delight. It had been a long time since she last saw him, and there were changes enough in those years, but she knew she was not mistaken, and that the man before her was her father.

Behind him was the masked man, and he had in his right hand a revolver, which was touching

the back of the prisoner, while his finger was on the trigger. It was another case of jailer and prisoner; and the former was going to make sure at all hazards that the latter did not escape.

"Thou canst see, little bird, that it was no vain boast which I made to thee. Thy father is here, and thou canst convince him at thy leisure that wealth without life is but a vain thing. He holds the key to thy future in his hands; let him beware how he turns it."

Faith scarcely heard; she had eyes only for her father. He looked the worse for wear, and his hands were handcuffed behind his back. At the same time, his face was full of courage, and there was no quaver in his tones as he spoke.

"Then this villain told me true when he said he had you here. So much the worse for us, my girl, but we will not be frightened at his threats. He will hardly care to seal his own death-warrant by carrying this outrage beyond limit."

"Of that we take the chances. I cared not to frighten the girl, so I but told her in plain language that her only hope of getting away was in thy coming to terms with us. I spoke, also, somewhat of her mother, who is in such plight as this, or worse. For her sake the child would be willing to sacrifice all of the glittering dross that she could obtain; and we trust to her to bring you to her way of thinking. Is there anything on which thou wouldst question me, or shall I leave thee alone together to consider whether it is best for all three to live, or die? It is the money that will speak to me, and that only. Without that to stand between, thy life would be as worthless as that of a snake whose head was under my heel."

"Then we have little enough hope, since no gold have I. Do your worst. What you mean by the nonsense about her mother I know not. As she has been dead for years it can make but little difference."

"Sorry I am to have to tell thee that I know that all to be a lie. It is not so many hours since thou partedst from the woman thou once claimed as wife; and thou hadst just whispered in her ear that you had wealth and to spare. I say nothing now of the gold that will be hers when she comes to her rights. That can be settled with her."

"I only know that the man you call Judge Ewing has been feeding you with a large amount of wind; and that if you believe the arrant nonsense you have just been speaking it is so much the worse for all of us. There will be little hope that we can ever come to terms. The few thousands I may be able to control I want badly enough as it is, but I would give them to see Faith and me out of this box. But it will take time to raise them. And it is not them that Ewing wants, at all. It is my life that he is after. He is afraid to take it himself, and is egging you men on to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. After that, he sees a way out, for himself, no doubt."

"For once thou art mistaken. This thing has gone beyond the hands of Ewing, and remains in mine. Were he to beg thy life ever so hard it would do no good. It is now all in the hands of Manuel, and it will be his voice that will decide whether thou art to live or die. Guess whether I will spare thee—unless it be to my profit."

"I guess you will, if it is to save your neck. I have been trying to beat that into your thick head for some hours, off and on. You have undertaken altogether too large a contract. A single man, or a single woman, would hardly be missed in Hard Luck. But when you begin to run them off by wholesale—and there are three or four men with mouths none of the smallest looking for the missing ones—you may find it does not take long to unravel a mystery, or discover a secret. After that you can guess what will happen. They will find us if they have to pull down half the houses in the town."

"Pass thine hours, then, in praying that they find thee not," retorted the man, as cool as ever.

"When there is no more chance for him, Manuel will go over the river perhaps; but be sure that he will not go alone. Thou has seen that we know all—in spite of thy denial. Of the wealth that is hidden in the mine naught belongs to thee. It is Manuel's. Lead him to it—him and his men—and turn it over without delay or reserve, and thy life, at least, is safe for the present. After that there will still be a question as to what we will do with the girl and her mother, but it is one easy to answer; and a word from thee will make the answer the proper one if otherwise she hesitates. In that matter we must trust thee, somewhat; but thy word has been as good as a bond heretofore, and we will not doubt it now. What is to be done lies before thee; I leave thee alone with thy daughter to talk this thing over. There will be a dozen hours yet, or more, for thought. See that they are well employed. If there be any doubt about the woman who was thy wife, we can take thee to her, but it must be after thou hast given a yes to thine own more particular question. And see that no attempt at escape be made. We keep good watch and guard; and thou art of more value to us dead than alive and at large."

The door shut behind him, and father and daughter were prisoners together.

It is hardly worth while to say that Hiram Hurd was by no means as confident as he had been trying to speak. For fear that some one might be watching from without, as much as to comfort and sustain his child, he presented as brave a face as ever, and there was the same stolid unconcern in his tones; but inwardly he was weeping over the presence of his child in the midst of such danger.

Faith was younger, and now that her father was found had more hope than ever. She cried a little at the outset, and then set to work to convince him that there was no use to worry, and that soon all would come right. His calmness did not deceive her altogether, and she found that there was an up-hill piece of work before her, since he soon gave her a hint that the less they said just then the better it would be.

"But mother?" she asked, in a whisper. "Is it true, what that man said? Is she living; and in his power?"

"The first is true, and I am afraid that the latter part is beyond denial. Let it be so, however. The triumph of these men will be but short. They dare not slay, and one way or another they will be checkmated before this thing is over. I do believe that your greatest danger is over, and has been since the time that Kale Canyon failed to kill you."

"How did you know that?" asked Faith. Such knowledge on the part of her father was puzzling.

"Oh, I saw your boy friend, who told me all about your coming here, and what happened to you on the way. We were on the hunt for you when I was taken, but I doubt not that he, and by this time his friend, the old trapper of whom he spoke, are searching for us both, and somehow I have faith that they will find us."

After that they talked some little together, but there was nothing said by Faith, though she kept her promise, which would be apt to induce her father to alter the determination he had already expressed, not to yield a particle to the demands of the man, who called himself Manuel, and professed to hold their fate in his hands. Hurd made some little exploration around the cell in which they were confined, but as his hands were still manacled, and he had no tools with which to work, it seemed like folly to think of attacking the strong walls that shut them in, and there was nothing to do but wait until they learned their fate, or help came to them from without. So the day wore on, and night came around again. Of course, in their underground prison they could not tell whether it was day or night, but Hiram kept track of the dragging hours pretty closely and was not far wrong in regard to the time when the hour of midnight once more came.

And Manuel came with it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WILD HORSE GOES INTO THE CORRAL.

"I HAVE been looking for you, high and low, for a month, and had about given up the job," said Maycroft to the woman as they turned away, and left Adam Gurley to his own devices.

"You may, and probably do, know that your uncle is dead, and that he left a will in your favor; but you probably do not know that a codicil has been discovered that makes an important addition to the conditions of the principal instrument. In case you are not found by the first of next month, and if you are, in case you do not reduce his fortune to possession, it will all go to certain charitable institutions—which ought to have it just about as much as a cat ought to have three tails. There is precious little time to waste, and if you know what is good for you, you will let me send you out of this to-night. I can stay and finish up this muddled affair just as well without you as with you; and have the satisfaction of knowing that you are in safety. Will you go?"

"And leave Faith's fate uncertain? Never! If what you tell me is true, so much the more reason for not moving an inch away from Hard Luck. The reason for the child's capture will be taken away, and she will be turned loose the moment it is found that she is no longer a valuable prisoner. Better for us would it have been if that uncle of mine had left his wealth to charitable institutions in the first place. It has nearly been the death of us both, and the end is not yet."

"Nonsense! The child is safe as a church; and this excitement will be the death of you sure enough. I doubt if you can stand it another day. The wonder to me is that you are not dead already."

"You are mistaken. It is the excitement that is keeping me alive. Last night I thought I was at death's door. When I knew that Faith was near me, and in danger, all that was changed. I will live in spite of them, and if this be true that you have just told me, I will last long enough to pass to her the wealth that I could never enjoy. If nothing else, it would buy her out of the hands that hold her. They

would wait if they knew—don't you think? Move carefully. Give them a chance to know. If it takes the last cent, the child must not be harmed."

In her excitement the woman stopped and caught Maycroft by the shoulders, clutching him tightly, while her frame for a moment trembled with emotion until she broke into a fit of coughing, such as Little Lum had heard when he was watching at Nibsey's shanty.

The detective, for such he was, had not heard her before, and the spasm took him by surprise. It seemed to him that the woman was about to die on his hands, and he bent over her with the solicitude of a man who not only had a kindly heart, but saw a large contingent fee fading away in the distance. A question or two he hurriedly asked, and then, seeing that he could not hope to obtain an answer from her in her present condition, he stooped, and was about to raise her from the ground when there came an interruption that effectually settled the matter of his assistance.

There was a thump and a fall, and Calico Dick lay stretched out at full length on the ground, a little convulsive motion in his limbs seeming to tell that life was passing away. It was only the blow of a fist, but it had landed squarely on the jugular, and had done its work better than if a club had been used.

"Hum!" gritted Long Pete, as he stooped down and peered into the face of the fallen man. "That was a wicked one, but I guess he ain't dead yet. It's time some one war lookin' after him. If I made any thing outen his talk he means to take a hand in—wonder how he'll like ther one I dealt him."

"But thar ain't much time fur foolin' 'round hyer. They both want ter be dragged in outer ther way, and ther calico chap fixed so tbet he won't be doin' harm when he gits back frum his feeble excursion. Mebbe I'm wrong, but, blame me ef I don't b'lieve this are ther woman that war 'round at Nibsey's shanty. Made a better strike than I knowed of. Lie thar, cuss ye, fur a minnit. I'll be back an' tend ter yer case. Ef yer neck ain't clean broke you'll be wantin' board an' lodgin' fur the night, an' I'll see 'bout gittin' a place ready. But ther woman are too precious ter leave lyin' 'round loose. Guess I'll take her 'long. How in vengeance did she git hyer?"

Pete Haverly knew well enough what he was about, and it did not take him long to make his arrangements. He was back again with help, long enough before Clarence Maycroft was out of his swoon; and as luck favored him, Pete got his man out of the way with safety and celerity. When the man from Rakestraw did open his eyes again, and found where he was, he uttered what was intended for a mock groan of resignation.

"They hold over me, after all. Guess our friend, Adam Gurley, will have a comfortable time if he waits till I get back. What is going to happen next? I have always found that when I got into such a snap as this, it was the very thing to help me out on the general average. They have me tied for keeps, but if the luck of my life don't fail me I guess there will be somebody badly fooled, and that somebody belongs to the other side in this little game."

He was hitting the truth nearer than he knew, though he did not dream in what way. If he had, perhaps he would not have been altogether satisfied with the way luck had served him. Some one had heard the sound of the blow, and kept close to the spot while Haverly was carrying away Diana Ammersly. When he returned Pete came near to catching this somebody fingering the head of the insensible detective, and when he once more went away this somebody followed closely on his heels, and after a little indulged in some extraordinary manifestations of delight.

"Blest of that don't give ther hull thing away! Ef I had Handcart hyer we would knock ther spots off ov ther gang. Ez he don't seem to be 'round, hanged ef I don't kerry ther thing out to ther end, all by meself, alone. Bet yer they are goin' ter wander nigh to ther present dormitory ov Faith; an' if they do I'm goin' thar too. You bet."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

KALE KANYON BEGINS TO LOOK OUT FOR HIMSELF.

"HELLO, pard; what yer doin' hyer?"

Adam Gurley waited for some time without seeing anything more of the calico man. He had promised to wait for him; but that was on the supposition that he would return almost immediately. He felt sure that something had happened to him; but he scarcely felt like going to find out what it was. While he was waiting here, Magdalena was in the hands of Kale Kanyon, and the more he thought of it the more he feared that if he did not move soon he would be apt to lose her altogether.

It was while he was feeling thus, and inwardly vowing that he would not wait much longer, that he heard a familiar voice; and the words were evidently addressed to him. He looked around sharply, and in the shadow that he saw

recognized Hank Vernon—who had been one of the little party from which Faith had fled.

Hank was as thoroughly depraved as the rest of them; but he was a true man after his own way; and had been a friend to Adam Gurley—more, perhaps, because he hated Kale Kanyon most heartily. Hank was an old settler at Hard Luck, too; and knew the ins and outs of things a great deal better than Gurley. The latter made up his mind on the instant.

"Hello, yourself! I am waiting here for Kale. He was to be back in a moment, and I think I have been waiting for half an hour. Which way you going?"

"Going to the ranch. Reckon Kale has forgotten you and gone there too. Better go along."

"Go along goes. Perhaps it will be just as well that he and I don't meet right away. We don't seem to hit it off as well as we might. He was saying some things to me that I don't want to hear said; and if it had not been for the business I would have knocked him down. Perhaps if I meet him where there won't be any outsiders to look on, and he says it over, I will knock him down, anyhow."

Gurley spoke like a man with a grievance, and Hank Vernon thought that he understood him. He knew well enough that Kale had become infatuated with Magdalena, and that the girl looked at him with an eye of positive disgust. He believed that she had played them the trick she had for the purpose of evading his persecutions, and having heard nothing to make him believe that Gurley or the girl would be false to the interest of his whilom friends and companions, he naturally took their side, while he would not hesitate at bringing Adam and Kanyon together. When Gurley struck in beside him it seemed the most natural thing in the world, and he did not know that he was leading the man straight to the hiding-place which of all others in the world he was most anxious to find.

Adam dissembled well, and joined with Vernon in taking every precaution to throw any possible spy off of the trail. They went slowly; and disappeared about the spot where Little Lum had lost the abductors the previous night.

With Hank to lead the way there was no difficulty in entering the retreat, though they found the guard there on the watch.

"Tumble in, both of you," was the salutation. "There will be a general gathering here to-night; and a healthy old racket when they come. There has been an escape; and if I had my way we would evacuate before the old lady gets around with a gang at her back, to do us all up. Kale went in to see the boss hours ago, but he's not back yet. When he comes we will know what are the orders, and whether she got into town."

"Of course she got into town," answered Gurley, who thought it might be as well to show some knowledge on the subject.

"If she knows the way back again as well as she seemed to know it out there will be trouble, sure enough. She got hold of the worst man for us that she could have struck. I wouldn't wonder if there would be orders to leave when Kale gets back. What has become of the girl he had cooped up here? If anything has happened to her there will be a riot. She is just as good a member of the family as he, or any other man. As such the boss swore that she should be protected. And he always keeps his word."

"She's in there; and I guess has nerve enough to bluff a dozen Kale Kanyons. Go and look after her interests yourself if you want to. If Kale can't do his own courting I don't propose to help him. All I have to do is to see that no one goes out without the pass; and she don't seem to have it."

The fellow would have talked longer, and perhaps given information that would have been worth the having; but Gurley waited to hear no more. He stepped into the passage, and following it by guess found himself face to face with Magdalena.

At sight of him she uttered a glad cry.

"Ah, you have come at last!"

"Yes, and it was time that I found you. It was an even thing that I did not murder that wretch. I had my hand on his throat, and in a second would have had my knife in his heart. I heard that he stole you away, and I wanted to wrench from his lips where he had hid you, but the villain would have died mute."

"Better as it is. I have feared more for you than for myself, or I would scarcely have left you as I did. We must get away from this if we can; and since you are here I begin to have hope. Look to your weapons, for Kale is a desperate man, and when there is no further hope for him I believe he would do his best not to die alone."

"The men have trusted me, and I care not to harm them if it can be avoided; but Kanyon can ask for no mercy at my hands since he has tried to do us the foulest of wrongs. If the rest leave it to us to fight it out with Kale, we need ask no more. If they side with him it is at their own risk. Vernon will be our friend until it comes to a question of his own safety; and one can ask him to go no further."

"You talk bravely. Something has happened—or is it only because you have decided to break with them all? Had you been like this there would have been no need for either Faith or myself to have run away, and we would have missed all these other dangers that we have been tangled in. It might have saved more lives than one."

She looked at him curiously as she spoke. At first she had not noticed the change; but now it seemed to her that he was almost another person. His voice was firmer, and had lost the whine that sometimes made it almost painful to listen to.

Gurley was hardly aware of the extent of the change, though he knew well enough that since he had seen the woman whom he had tried to murder, and knew beyond a doubt that the effort had been unsuccessful, he felt as though a heavy load had been lifted from his shoulders, and life had received a different aspect. For the moment it almost seemed to him that he must tell Magdalena all. At least he would let her know that he was no longer the slave of Harold Ewing. Whatever other evil he might have done he could afford, if need be, to bear the punishment, for since, that one great crime had been rolled away from his conscience.

"You see it, do you? I cannot tell you all just now—it would take too long, and there would be things in it that you might not understand; but it is true that something has happened since I saw you last, and you need not fear to trust me now. I can take your part against the world. And if we ever get out of this—as we must—I can promise you that we have seen the last of these men with whom I have been lately mixed. Folly and poverty bring one to strange associations, and the way down hill gets easier to travel as one goes along."

"There may be a fight, and I may die in it; but sooner that than more of this."

His voice had sunk to a whisper, and he waved his hand around, with a gesture that took in the squalid little underground apartment. Truly his folly could bring him not much lower; and this was worse than poverty.

Before Magdalena could answer they heard the voice of Kale Kanyon at the other end of the passage. He was speaking to the men that were there on guard.

"I've seen Posey, an' I don't like the way he talks. I've seen you men, an' some more ov the gang, an' I don't like yer looks. If there's anybody hyer has business with Kale Kanyon it's ther time right now ter settle it. That's my horse out there, and in just about five minutes more I'll be on the way South. Has anybody got anything to say against that?"

Kale had been drinking more than he knew. As he glared around after his question it was not hard to see that he was in a deadly humor, and was ready to fight at the twist of a wrist, or a slip of the tongue. And Kale was an unpleasant man to fight with. Only one man had anything to say, and that was Hank Vernon.

"We're here, and you can say just what you have a mind to about us. But it strikes me that you are just a little too free about some of the others, that it has always been understood we were not to mention by name when we were chatting over things that we didn't want an outsider to hear. Your neck is in the noose just as far as any other man's, and if you have lost your sand, and want to skip, we ain't dying to keep you here as long as you keep quiet about what you know, and don't know. But if you are really spoiling for a fight, there is Adam Gurley in the den. He will be in about the right humor to give you all that you want in that line. When he gets to going he's a fighter from 'way back, and able to wind up two or three Kale Kanyons, if he just half tries."

Vernon's announcement startled Kanyon in spite of the whisky that he had been drinking; but it did not make him any the less vicious. He said never a word, but whipped out his revolvers, and bolted into the little passage.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WORK OF A MADMAN.

KALE went in haste, and the passage was dark. Before he had reached the end of it he came to the ground with a thundering fall. Some one or something had caught him by the ankle, and given him a twist that brought him down. As he fell, however, he broke the gripe; and before its giver could get another hold Kanyon had sprung to his feet, and bounded into the room.

Sure enough, Adam Gurley was there; and did not seem to want to shun the interview for which he had prepared himself as promptly as the other.

"Hold, Kale Kanyon!" he exclaimed, promptly raising both hands. "I would sooner not kill you; but you must see that I have you lined. Out of this, and let white men talk. If you think the men will stand back and see you sell them out you are much mistaken. Ah!"

Kale did not answer a word, but his revolver and that of Adam Gurley cracked together.

Kanyon fired a little the first, and at his shot Gurley went down.

Some one else went down, also. When Adam fired he fired at random, and his pistol pointed anywhere but at Kale Kanyon. It was simple chance that his finger tightened on the trigger just when Magdalena was in line. She threw up her hands with a gasping cry, tottered toward Adam, and fell before she reached him.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Kanyon, as he saw the wreck that he had made. "All down but nine, set 'em up on the other alley! Looks as though I had made a clean scoop, and there wasn't much left ter live for. Are ye dead, girl? You can't say that it was I that did it, can you? That comes ov children handlin' firearms. By heavens! There's blood on her clothes, and she's white ez ther wall. But she's mine, all ther same. Who's goin' ter take her away from Kale Kanyon now?"

In his excitement his voice was coarser, and his words rougher than usual. He put his pistols back in their holsters, strode to the side of the girl and picked her up.

"I got her in my arms again, if it is after she's dead. If I could only kill that hound that calls himself her father two or three times more it would make me feel ever so much better. But I reckon there's no one left to stop me now. If there is he will have to fight me hard. But maybe she ain't dead? Poor little woman! She hated Kale Kanyon like sin, but he didn't kill her. If she's over the range it was the man she stuck to as killed her. And—'pears to me I kin feel her heart a-beatin'; an' ther blood don't run red, like it would if she had passed in her checks for good and all. Let me get her out in the air that's fresher. It's enough to murder a woman to keep her here anyhow. Pity I didn't think ov that afore it may be too late."

When Kale bolted into the passage the other men did not care at once to follow. He had too much the start of them for them to stop him; and when he reached the other end there was no telling how soon Adam Gurley would open fire. They stood and looked at each other. First they heard something like the noise of a scrambling fall; and then almost immediately after, the crash of firearms, as the two men fired.

"One of them was a trifle late, and I reckon he has it hard. Two such men don't fire that close together without leaving blood on the floor. It's a mighty unhandy place to explore, but if we don't hear something soon we will have to try it. Queer we don't hear something from the woman."

No one moved, however, and no one gave Vernon any answer. They heard a muttering and mumbling beyond, and it was more trying than a scream, or a cry for help. Then Kale Kanyon came stalking out, with Magdalena in his arms, and partly resting over his shoulder. They could see that she was white and motionless, and it seemed to Vernon that there was blood dropping to the floor. Whether it was his or hers he did not stop to think. He stepped toward Kale.

"What's all this? That looks like a corpse you carry; and the gang hasn't got down to be woman-slayers. Let up till we know what you have been doing. Stand by me, men. If this is bloody murder we want to know something more about it before he passes out."

"Keep those hands away from your guns or there will be more of it," shouted back Kanyon, with a quick motion for his weapons. "Adam Gurley was a fool, and this is some of his work. If you don't believe me you can measure the caliber of his six, and see. Stand aside or I blow you cold."

Magdalena cumbered him, and his threat came too soon. Before he could get a pistol from its holster there were three covering him.

"Don't you try it, Kale! Fair warning. We mean you square; but we want to know what's what. Perhaps things are as you say; and then, perhaps you are getting ready to go with the judge, and sell us out to the highest bidder. You have been putting on a heap of frills since you came in from the trail, and now we want to see what they are made of. We want to hear Adam Gurley talk, or see if you shot him in the back, before you pass on any further. You hear me? Lay down the woman and put up your hands. If you are playing us foul you know too much to be roaming at large just now."

The drop was on Kale; and though he did not loosen his arms from around Magdalena, or show any signs of throwing up his hands, he made no offensive motion while Harry Vernon was laying down the law. He only gathered Magdalena a little closer, and listened with a mad gleam in his eye. Then, with a little twist of his body he threw the body of the girl between himself and Vernon, at the same time giving a side spring that carried him to one corner of the room.

"Back, all of you!" he shouted. "Hands down and fingers empty or I blow you all to kingdom come! I am just ready to go myself, and I'll see that I take good company along with me. You can't drop me so that my finger won't crook, and there is powder enough in this keg to

send us all to never come back. A touch of the finger and away you all go."

When Kale threatened it was never a jest; and there was little chance that he would not make his words good, whether he wished to or not. The muzzle of the cocked revolver was buried in the powder of the open keg, and he stood ready to receive the shot that would be the end of them all.

"Oh, come now, Kale," said one of the men who had not as yet spoken.

"What's got into you? Put up that gun, and talk sense. We are three to one, and you can't get away from the odds, when they hold the drop on you to boot. If every man can rustle around here to suit himself, and tramp on all the toes he can find in the way, how long would we hold together? If every thing is on the square what do you want to ruffle up this way for? Is Gurley dead?"

"Go look for yourselves, if you want to know; but don't you stand between me and the door. If I can't go out one way I'll go the other, an' take you all with me. Last warning. I'm getting ready now: and when the train's all laid you can't stop it, nor can I, either. It's death for all hyer."

"The infernal fool has drank himself into the higher jim-jams; and means every word he says. I reckon it's time that we are getting out of here ourselves. Hold on, Kale! We are going, and you can have the ranch to yourself."

"Hold on yourselves! I'm runnin' this thing now; and we don't part company. The first move of any of you and I will pull trigger. Just you stay and see how I am going to fix it. Magdalena is dead; Adam's dead; and now it's time that the rest of us are dead too."

He let Magdalena drop down in front of him; and while his right hand still held the cocked pistol to the powder, with his left he drew out a handful, and with the gravity of a man who had all his strength yet was mad from drink, allowed it to run down in a little train, all along the top of the table at his side. Then he jerked up the keg, and tipping it over on its side threw out more than another handful so that it fell over the end of the train.

All the time his eyes never turned from the three men who were watching him in a state of fascination. They had given way to him in the first place, and now it seemed too late to resist.

When, however, he drew a match from his pocket, and striking it across the table applied it to a few scattering grains the furthest from the keg, they waited for no more but turned and fled. Stumbling, falling, rising again to stumble once more, they made their way out of the cave, and as the last one found the open air they heard behind them, in the room they had left, a loud report.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HANDCART ON DECK.

KANYON uttered a harsh laugh as he saw the retreat. He was desperate enough, and mad enough to do almost anything; yet he was scarcely as willing to throw away his life as he had pretended. The still burning match dropped from his fingers, and he went down to look once more at Magdalena. As he stooped he heard some one speaking. The sound appeared to come from the passage through which he had but a little while before carried the lifeless body of the girl.

"A good, strong bluff, that; but, Kale, I reckon it ain't goin' ter win. Old Handcart'll hev ter take yer in, arter all. Stiddy, now!"

The caution was a threat, and Handcart did not repeat it. Indeed, there was no time, and for just a second the old man had opportunity to wish that he had remained quiet until, in some way, he had drawn Kale's teeth. Startled at the unexpected voice, and knowing that there was no time to grasp the weapon that he had dropped aside, he caught at the glowing match, with a quick motion, and pushed it along until the coal still glowing at its end touched his train.

But, at the same instant, Handcart's revolver spoke. It plowed up a little furrow on the table, scattering the train for the space of an inch, perhaps, before the fire had reached that spot. Then Handcart followed, like a thunderbolt, swinging his revolver around and striking with all his might.

The iron-bound butt landed high on Kale's forehead, and sent him back from the table at once. Handcraft leaped on him, twisted his hands behind his back, and snapped over his wrists a pair of handcuffs.

"Now then, ter see ef we can't keep ther gang out when they find ther place ain't quite elected ter kingdom git back ag'in. Ef I kin do that fur awhile I reckon they will do a heap ov thinkin'. The old man is a leetle slow, but he jin'rally gits thar with one foot, ef he can't make it with both."

It took courage to examine the outer fastenings, but Vernon and the rest were not ready to return, and so he was unmolested. In the course of a few moments he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was safe from intrusion. Then he began to look over his prizes; and in

very bad shape did he find them—at least, to all appearance.

If Kale's skull was not cracked it was not for want of hard hitting; and for the present he lay like a log. Handcart only gave him a passing glance, however. He had caught sight of Magdalena, lying in a crumpled heap just as she had slid from Kanyon's arms.

He raised her up tenderly, and though her face was pale, and there was blood on her breast, he did not believe that she was dead. The wound was not a deep one, for the ball had glanced along near the collar-bone, and gone its way. He put his flask to her lips, and chafed her wrists and hands.

"More fright than any thing else. 'Pears ter be strugglin' ter draw a long breath, now. Ef she kin once resuspirate I jedge ther heft ov ther danger'll be over. Wish she'd hurry. I wanter see what's bin goin' on in ther other room. Bullits war a-flyin' thar, a bit ago; an' like ez not there's a loud call fur a sawbones er a coroner. Thar, now, purty; be cool, clam an' collected. Thar ain't nothin' ov yer missin' an' ef thar war, Old Handcart'd bring it tergether ag'in. Ye'r safe, ez a bank. Kale can't do no damidge now, an' ther rest are out doors in ther cold, an' couldn't git in ef they wanted."

Magdalena was reviving, though it was not likely that she was hearing what Handcart was saying. She opened her eyes, and stared at him in a bewildered sort of way.

Again he touched his flask to her lips, and, as he managed to get a number of drops between them the revival continued. Soon her lips moved.

"Father! Where is he? Is he hurt?"

"I'll tell yer later on, soon ez I'm sure you kin spare me. Bin too busy lookin' you over ter think ov any thing else. Guess he's in ther next room, an' ef you kin spare me I'll see how he looks. Mustn't 'spect too much, but you kin hope fur all yer wants to."

"Go at once, then. I am strong enough to hear the worst, and must know it."

She was stronger than Handcart had hoped to see her in twice the time. He waited no longer, but moved away without another word.

To his surprise he found that Adam Gurley, though hard hit, was still alive, and had so far revived that he was trying painfully to drag himself toward the passage. He looked up, weakly desperate, and tried to raise the weapon he still held in his hand. Handcart was a stranger, and he did not know what he was to expect.

"Hyar, hyer, man! None ov that! You jest want ter take life easy, an' wait tell you kin git a plaster on. I kin call myself a frien' fur ther present; an' I'm hyer ter do yer good. Ther young woman hez got 'round all right, an' are callin' fur you. You don't want ter shock her too much with yer galvanicized corpse antics."

"And Kale? Where is he? He's shot me through and through, but I'll get onto him yet."

"Never mind Kale. I've got him, and he's not hurtin' people ez much ez he war. Let me look you over, and see how bad you're goin' ter scare Magdalena. After that we'll call her in."

"She needs no calling; she is here herself."

Her step was not as firm as it once was, and her voice had a quaver of weakness in it, but she looked better than many sick women. Before Adam could say another word she was at his side.

The two looked over the wounded man together, and Handcart's face was long in spite of himself. The wound was not necessarily mortal, but it was a serious one, and the man would not be in condition to move very far.

"He'll do, I guess," he finally said. "Handcart hez hed ez much 'sperience ez a reg'lar pill-driver, so you kin tie ter what he says. We must git outen hyer; an' by good luck I kin show ther way so ez it won't be fur afore yer safe. Then I'll go back ter Hard Luck an' git help. It wouldn't do fur me ter be cotched totin' a sick man ov his size, all by myself alone. Ef you kin keep yer nerve up it'll all come right."

"Let it be as you wish: only, hurry. I will be dyin' a thousand deaths all the time, until I can get away from here."

"This way, then. You kin hold ther light, mebbe, an' I kin make out ter take keer ov him. Ther's a way out that puzzles 'em ter find, an' ef I warn't a expert'n caves I wouldn't 'a' knowed whar it war meself."

Supporting the wounded man he turned into the passage. With the light that Magdalena carried it was not hard to see how Handcart had made his entrance—or how the prisoner who had been missing had made her escape. A section of the wall revolved on a pivot, and there was a yawning hole, a yard long, and half as high, along the bottom of the passage. Through this aperture Handcart dragged the wounded man, and Magdalena followed. When she had passed through, the stone turned to its place at a movement of the hand, and the three were in another chamber, which looked like the long unused shaft of a mine.

"Make yerselves at home, now, an' don't be afeared ov sp'ilin' ther furnitoor. Jest rest ez best yer kin, an' I'll try be back in a couple hours. Better not be movin' 'round tell I ar-

rove. Don't know ther ground ary too well me-self, an' you might git a tumble."

He did not stop for argument, and was soon making the best of his way toward the town, the lights of which he could see glimmering in the distance.

As yet he had no very clear idea of what he would do next. He believed that the secret of the deserted mine was unknown to the members of the league, and that Adam Gurley and Magdalena would be safe there if he returned in anything like a reasonable time, but the trouble was to know just who to approach to get assistance in carrying the wounded man to Hard Luck. Hiram Hurd's men might be safe to trust if they could be found; but the Great Expectations had closed down, and the men were mostly scattered through the town. Some of them, even, might be identified with the Posey Peebles set.

"If I only had even Lum," he thought. "I could set ther boy up ez nurse, an' take me time ter scoutin' 'round tell I found some 'un. Hev ter trust ter luck, ef I do run ag'in' a snag."

Luck and the snag seemed to be working together. He had hardly reached the town when he dropped into a difficulty—for of course he never hesitated when he saw the opening. There was some kind of a riot, and three men were on one. There was no shooting, and but little noise. They had come upon the one from behind, as he was skulking in the shadows, and all that could be heard was the sound of a number of solid blows, heavy enough, Handcart thought, to beat the life out of the man on whose head they descended.

"My luck ter-night, to act. Goin' 'round, savin' fellers when they're at ther last gasp. Hyer we be, hot an' heavy. Make way fur ther bul-gine. Old Handcart's a-comin' with his wheels rollin', and tires tight. Hyer yer have it, an' now yer got it. Down in front so ez ter leave more room fur those behind ter fall. Hands off tell I see what's what, an' where are ther t'other!"

He hit out as he spoke, and each blow counted. Taking the men by surprise they made no attempt at resistance, but as soon as they found what he was after they ran away as well as they could, though for a few yards it was a staggy sort of a procession. The old man made no attempt at pursuit, but once satisfied that the victory was on his side and that the defeat was final, he bent over to see who it was that was on the ground in front of him. Not altogether to his surprise he found that it was Judge Ewing.

"They are gettin' down to business at last," he muttered, as felt carefully of the victim's head. "Pritty nigh ter a pulp, but a heap ov life left yit. Ef one could only prove that Posey ordered this, what a heap sight ov trouble it might save. This thing ov knowin' all about a job, 'thout being bein' able ter swear ter it in a court, are what makes work an' worry. What's ter be did with him now?"

"Give him to me. I will take care of him," said a woman who came hurrying to the spot. "I would have warned him, but I came too late. He is not dead; he cannot be dead!"

The woman was Mrs. Wallace, and she bent over the judge as she spoke, and felt of his head very much as Handcart had done. When she drew her little hands back and looked at them there was blood on them, and she gave a cry of horror.

"Don't be skeered, madame. I feel him begin to wiggle, and it don't seem ez though ther' war ary bones broke. His lips are beginnin' ter move, now."

"Then help me home with him. They may come back at any moment; but once there and he will be safe."

Time was precious, but Handcart could not well refuse. When they tried to raise him up they found that with a little assistance he could stand on his feet. Though his steps were tottery there was scant trouble in guiding them in the direction of the Home. And by the time they reached the house, instead of being exhausted the judge had gathered strength with every step. He had been silent so long that it was a surprise when, as they halted at the door, they heard him speak.

"Curse them all! This is some of Posey Peebles's work. And a bad job it was for him. I remember, now: the whole thing has come back—the thirteen years and all. I know where to find him in his den, and I'm going there, if there's not another soul in this town of thieves to back me. I'll be even before the night is over, or my name is not Harold Ewing."

"Put it right thar, pard," said Handcart, extending his hand. "I jest got bizzness thar me-self, an' ef yer wants a pard to ketch 'em in the act, take me along."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"ALL HERE, AND JUST IN TIME."

MANUEL found Hiram Hurd and his daughter in no particularly plastic frame of mind. They had been prisoners too long to be under the influence of the first shock, and they were not of the kind to be broken down by a few hours of confinement.

Besides, he had given Hiram a puzzle. The

latter was trying to think who Manuel could be. He had known a great many Mexicans in his time, but none of them answered to the bill, nor did he remember any reason why one of them should be seeking after revenge for anything that he had ever done.

He came in, now, with his revolvers as handy as ever. They had seen him once before during the day, though it was but a glimpse, as he shoved in a scanty meal. If he had brought a supper with him this time, he would have been more welcome.

"The time is past, and Manuel comes for his answer. Think well before it is given, since the fate of more than thyself hangs upon it. If we come not to terms, there is nothing left but to kill all. Hard Luck will give itself little concern about those that are missing; but if they came back, they would quit the false scent that is laid for any of them and strike—if they were hired to do it—where it would do the most harm."

"When you have us, you have all there is of us. There is no one who is interested in our life or death, or who would give a dollar to help us or hurt us. I have told you that a few thousands was all I could control, and that it would take time to gather that. If we can come to terms, and I can be set free, with my girl, here, and any other prisoners you may have taken as part of your scheme, I am willing to give you what I have, and what I can raise. The Great Expectations has petered out, and five thousand is the limit. If that won't do, you will have to kill us—if you can, and dare. By this time the pursuit is beginning to narrow down, and you have not much time left to make your peace with me. If I asked you for the five thousand to draw off my forces, it would be a better bargain for you than you deserve, or could ask for, if you really understood how matters stand."

Manuel listened gravely, and then laughed harshly under his mask.

"There be not so many men in Hard Luck who would care to peril their lives in a war against Manuel and his men: and the most of those that would are already in his hands, and have to look out for themselves. The detective that was looking for thee is near to death, and thy wife has been but just brought in. Perhaps if thou couldst see them both, it would shake that nerve of thine, great though it may be."

"I know nothing about either of them. I have offered all I can do; now act as it seems best."

"But, child's play is all this. Too long have we dallied. It is time to use other means that are in our hands. This girl! To lose a finger, or an ear, or even a whole hand? It would be unpleasant, but after that she would be none the less worth saving. There was a treasure found, and Manuel intends to have it. Thy wife has wealth at her control, and that wealth must be Manuel's. If we kill thee we can still find the treasure, which without doubt is hidden somewhere within thy mine. After that we can make terms with the woman, though it might be safer to do it with the living. As to that we must take the risk. So far as man can go we will go, before we send thee to death, but of what use is a living mule, that will not draw to the collar? Only to trade, and if he cannot be traded it is cheaper to kill him than to feed him. This is all. Take thy choice. Torture for thyself and the girl—perhaps death for her too—or come to our terms. If thou hold back in the least thy detective dies anyhow."

In such a deadly matter of fact way did the heartless villain speak that it was hard for Hurd to keep up the bold front on which he had decided. Yet he did not yield an iota.

"You must run your own risks, then. It is not likely that I would be willing to die if I had the means of saving myself, or that I would allow harm to come to my child. I am powerless in your hands, and you can work your will; but I warn you to beware. The league in Hard Luck has been a mystery. It has only been known that it exists. But, there are now those very close on discovery. It would not be hard for me to name over some of its members now. And others can do the same. Be sure that punishment will come to them before long."

"Easy would it be to call names; but hard to give proof. Until that is found the league will laugh at your threats; and treat all its foes as they will soon treat the fool who has tried to fathom its secrets and pick out its members. And so thy answer is still the same?"

"The same."

"Enough. The red work will then begin. And, first of all, to show how little we fear thy threats we bring in more witnesses. Thou canst then see if it was the truth that Manuel told thee."

He clapped his hands, and there was the tramp of footsteps without. Then the door opened and a number of masked men filed into the room. With them came two prisoners—Clarence Maycroft, and Hiram Hurd's wife.

"Go to thy mother, *muchacha*; it may be thy last chance on earth, and she needs thy care."

Diana looked up feebly, and, before she fairly understood, Faith had her in her arms.

"Pity it would be to disturb the reunion, but, business is business."

Manuel was a trifle off his guard. His voice had changed a little, and Hiram recognized a familiar ring about it, without being able to place it. Had he known positively it would not have been policy to allow it to appear. He was not ready to yield, yet he began to see that the time might come when he would want to, and that it would be well to have as few obstacles as possible in the way. He was surprised to see that his wife had more strength than when he held the interview at Nibsey's cabin, and wondered that she had not died under suspense and and rough usage.

Calico Dick, for once, had nothing to say for himself, and looked as though his wits might have gone wandering. He leaned heavily on the man who had him in charge, and his calico suit was torn and soiled, as though he had been roughly handled.

Of the four prisoners Faith was the only one who had free hands, so it was evident the outlaws did not intend to take any chances of resistance.

For only a minute or two was Faith allowed to rest sobbing at her mother's side. Then once more Manuel spoke, and his voice was sterner than it had yet been.

"One and Two, take the girl with thee, and bring back her little finger. We are not cruel, and would not have her parents see hersuffer."

Like automats two of the masked men advanced toward the child.

Faith remained silent; Diana uttered a feeble cry; but Hiram Hurd uttered a roar, and, handcuffed as he was, darted at the men. It seemed to him that if he could fall upon them he could crush them with his mere weight.

"Back!" exclaimed the leader, as he stepped in front of the father. In his hand he held a long-bladed knife, and this he presented bayonet-fashion at the breast of the frantic Hiram. Another step and he would be impaled.

The step was taken, but Hiram did not go down. With a suddenness that was startling, life and strength came back to the man from Rakestraw. Careless whether the manacles cut his wrists, he gave a great wrench, and there was a snapping of steel. With free hands he flung himself on Manuel. One wrench, one heave, and the scoundrel measured his length on the floor, the mask dropping from his face as he fell. Then, Maycroft turned like a flash toward the other outlaws, to find that he was looking into the muzzles of their revolvers.

"Do not fire; I give it up!" shouted Hurd, his coolness back again, as he saw how near they were to the line of bloodshed. "The treasure is yours."

"Guess not!" piped a boy's voice, "we're all here, an' jest in time. Up with yer hands, you villains, er down ye go!"

And, to emphasize the words of Little Lum, there was a chorus of jarring clicks, as half a dozen hammers went back. He had not come alone.

From Calico Dick unarmed, the men wheeled like a flash to face the armed foe in their rear. At the moment there was a crash of firearms, that left the odds too overwhelming to be met. The one or two unhurt threw down their arms, and the league was broken!

"An' Posey Peebles bez ther floor," remarked Old Handcart, as he advanced into the room, and pointed at the motionless body of the *quasi* Manuel.

"Looks ez though his neck war broken, but guess thar ain't no such good news—fur ther present."

Judge Ewing was there along with the rest, but he came no further than the door. When he saw that the fight was over, and the victory against the league, he quietly stole back, and, save by the widow, was seen no more in Hard Luck. In the morning it was found that both were missing.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FINAL ROUND-UP.

THERE was little of mystery about the opportune appearance of Little Lum and the rest. He had followed Long Pete, and discovered the place where that ruffian and his prisoner had disappeared. He waited for some time before attempting to go further, and then discovered that there were several men watching the spot after the manner of persons who had designs on those inside, though they had come on the carpet a little too late to see what game was holed there. While he was approaching them the judge and Old Handcart put in an appearance; and after a few words of explanation all the forces were joined. The men on the watch were waiting for Clarence Maycroft, not knowing that he had already passed to the inside.

The judge cleared the way for them; had his revenge; and then vanished.

Of course, after this there was no more suspicion—it was all a certainty. Posey Peebles was there, and so was Matt Hardy—the latter badly wounded. And the underground retreat was connected with the one in which the judge had been trapped, earlier in the evening. When Ewing lost his head, and the memory of thirteen

years, Posey took charge of things without delay and proceeded with the plan already settled.

As soon as the work here was done, Old Handcart confided to Maycroft the history of his discovery of the other den of the gang, and what had happened there. It might not be safe to visit the place unless in force, but he was anxious to get back if possible before the ousted villains forced their way in again, since it was likely there would be plenty of evidence against the league, lying around there, to say nothing of the prisoners that could be picked up. And, fully as important was the fact that Magdalena was there, alone with a wounded man, and probably, by this time, in the darkness.

"That comes of having too much business on hand at once. I took the contract to look up this league; and to find another missing woman; but at the same time I was searching for Adam Gurley, and the young woman he had always called his daughter. I think there will be very little difficulty in proving that she is only his by adoption, and he will hardly put anything in the way if he cares for her as much as he sometimes says. It would be uncomfortable for him if I took him in along with this lot; and perhaps he has had punishment enough. If he makes no trouble I think I will let him go."

In this fashion the detective talked on the way out, but he found that fate had settled the matter for him, since Gurley no longer lived. Magdalena was in no condition to listen to the story the detective had ready for her; but afterward she heard it, and went away to enjoy her own.

Harry Vernon and the others had not waited for further developments. They felt that there was danger in the air, and had the good luck to have made themselves scarce before they were sought for. But Kale Canyon was there, and was a prize worth the finding, since he was wanted for more crimes than one.

Hiram Hurd, as he still continued to be called, enjoyed his treasure, after all, and his wife lived long enough to reduce her fortune to possession and pass it over to her daughter. Love had long since died out between husband and wife, but, while Diana lived she had kindest attention from Hiram Hurd.

As for Little Lum, though there was nothing found out that had any bearing on him and his, yet Hurd would have been glad enough to make provision for the boy who had been such a good friend to his daughter. But he and Old Handcart preferred to go back into the wilderness, and live their life out as they there found it. The boy was in love with the ways of a nomad, and for the present it was useless to try to wean him from them. The settlements were good enough to visit, now and then, for the sake of adventure and supplies, but he did not care to make them his permanent abiding place. For the present he preferred to be a boy at large, and his own master, so long as he could have Old Handcart for a companion. The two went to their camp in the cave, and for aught that has been heard to the contrary at Hard Luck, they may be living there yet.

When Hard Luck was relieved of two of her most prominent saloon-keepers, and a number of her tougher citizens, there was quite a vacuum for a time, but the gap was filled with more desirable material, and the town lost much of its ill-repute from that day. It took on a fresh boom, and when Hiram Hurd revisited it, a year later, he scarcely knew the place.

For the rest, Clarence Maycroft is still a detective, still takes desperate chances, and sometimes poses in such characters as the Wild Horse from Rakestraw, but for all that he has a wife—and the first part of her name is—Magdalena.

THE END.

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